THE Nation.

OBAMA'S FATEFUL CHOICE

AFGHANISTAN: A SPECIAL ISSUE

INCLUDING

STEPHEN M. WALT THE REALIST CASE AGAINST THE WAR

SELIG S. HARRISON NATIONALISM'S WOES

ROBERT DREYFUSS HOW TO GET OUT

ANN JONES REMEMBER THE WOMEN?

NOVEMBER 9, 2009
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Letters

Deadline Poet Hits Bull's-Eye

Upper Marlboro, Md.
Thanks to Calvin Trillin ["Deadline Poet," Oct. 26], a neutron bomb just landed in Roman Polanski's lap, where, one can hope, it did the most damage.
Lee Travers

Lancaster, Pa.
It may be Trillin's line about "one eighth grader" that does it in his "What Whoopi Goldberg ('Not a Rape-Rape'), Harvey Weinstein ('So-Called Crime') et al. Are Saying in Their Outrage Over the Arrest of Roman Polanski."
Dianne Jarreau

Lansing, Mich.
Calvin Trillin's poem is powerful. I thank him for "naming names" in the title, and his line about the rules applying only to "the little people" is so accurate. I hope the poem is a catalyst for justice and that punishment for Polanski is swift and severe.
Valerie Jemerson

Kill Devil Hills, N.C.
The Hollywood apologists for Polanski's disgusting behavior are enablers of every pedophile who slithers through the world preying upon children. It's about time Polanski is called what he is.
George Mendelson

Rand Corporation

Mt. Sterling, Utah
Richard Lingeman, in "Nader's Road to Utopia" [Oct. 12], speculates that the 300,000 copies of Ayn Rand's books sold this year were purchased by "Glenn Beck-heads arming themselves to resist Obama 'socialism.'" More likely they were sold to schools; Rand is routinely taught in high school. As a junior, my son suffered through *Atlas Shrugged*, an experience my daughter will share next year. The same school required permission slips for students to listen to the president's speech in September.
Melody Graulich

letters@thenation.com

Saving the Public's Media

Carlisle, Pa.
William F. Baker, in "How to Save the News" [Oct. 12], rightly pleads for greater government support of our public media. Baker cites staggering numbers that show us to be woefully derelict in buttressing our public media. Based on population, Germany gives sixty-nine times more than we do; England, fifty-five times; Denmark, forty-five; Japan, twenty-eight; Canada, twenty; Ireland, fifteen. Then there are the massive impediments to impartial investigation and reporting of the vested interests of the agglomerators (think Clear Channel) and Clinton's telecommunications sellout.
Richard Brady

Portrait of the Artist

Florence
I thought to myself while reading Barry Schwabsky's "Fever Charts," on Jack Tworkov [Oct. 12], "This is an excellent article." And I thought the same thing as I finished it, "What an excellent article." In the next instant, though, it hit me that there wasn't a single word about the work. What is the quality of Tworkov? I mean that in every sense. Tworkov was always in the right place, always respected; did his paintings add anything to the equation? Bradley Walker Tomlin was there too, and his pictures didn't. I think it was in 1978 I saw some Minimalist paintings by Tworkov—solid gray and some linear geometry. It's hard to get emotional about the unemotional, but they seemed more personal than his wavy Abstract Expressionism. Schwabsky's views on Tworkov's artistic strength, or lack of it, would be interesting.
John Spike

New York City
I agree with Barry Schwabsky that it is so important that young artists see the paradox of having an amazing career and still feeling the stings of the art world! But I do

(continued on page 26)

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Obama's Fateful Choice

President Obama will soon make what could be the defining decision of his presidency. The course he chooses in Afghanistan will tell us a lot about the kind of country we will become during his administration.

Obama has called Afghanistan a war of necessity and fed the notion that it is the "good war," in contrast to the one in Iraq. But Afghanistan policy should not be a hostage to the president's past rhetoric. On a matter of such critical importance, the White House needs to look anew at the situation and consider the likely consequences of this decision for national security and for America's other needs.

EDITORIAL

The course of the war over the past eight years, along with the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, should have led the White House to explore a broader range of options than the ones the president has before him. Neither sending more troops to expand our counterinsurgency nor reverting to a forward-based counterterrorism operation would enhance national security or be in the best interests of Afghanistan. The president should expand the policy review to include alternatives that would allow Washington to disengage militarily and pursue a regional diplomatic initiative to bring about a new power-sharing arrangement, along the lines spelled out by Robert Dreyfuss on page 19.

The US experience in Afghanistan makes it clear that this is not a war of necessity. We have learned—or should have learned—that we can keep Americans safe from terrorism even if remnants of the Al Qaeda leadership continue to enjoy relative safe haven in Pakistan or parts of Afghanistan. Indeed, the greater danger today comes from a small and dispersed terrorist network that has at most a tangential connection to the region. American safety therefore depends not on eliminating faraway Al Qaeda safe havens but on common-sense counterterrorism and homeland defense measures: extensive intelligence cooperation, expert police work, border control and the occasional surgical use of special forces to disrupt imminent attacks.

We should also have a better appreciation of Pakistan's complicated political landscape and how the war in Afghanistan affects it. Clearly, some groups in the Pakistani intelligence service and military tolerate or even encourage the Taliban as a way to thwart US and Indian interests in Afghanistan. But we also know that a civilian Pakistani government and its military will curb the Taliban when they feel themselves threatened or decide it is in Pakistan's best interest. We should understand that escalating the war only creates more divisions within Pakistan and strengthens the forces there that have supported the Taliban. Thus, the best safeguard for stability is to support the evolution of Pakistan's democratic government, which for its own reasons rejects extremism.

The course of the Afghan war also suggests that this is no longer the good war that those arguing for more troops believe it is. In eight years we have made little progress in creating a viable state or system of government, building a national army and police or creating an economy less dependent on the drug trade. Contrary to the arguments of some in the administration, it is not for lack of trying. The United States and its NATO partners have had more than 40,000 troops in Afghanistan since 2006 and have spent more than $300 billion on military and civilian operations. We of course should do more to provide development and humanitarian assistance. But it is telling that so far all we have produced is a growing insurgency and a corrupt government

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Women belong at the center of the debate over the Afghan war, not on the margins.
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Katrina vanden Heuvel: Happy days for Goldman Sachs

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that has lost whatever popular support it may have had.

To be sure, a Taliban takeover of Afghanistan would bring new suffering for many Afghans, especially women, and many Afghans look to the United States for protection and security. But just as surely, a substantial, determined minority does not see our presence there that way, and that is a prescription for insurgency. Indeed, the more the United States has sought to expand its military reach, the more the insurgency has flared, and the more civilians, including women, have been victims of the violence. Not even the most sophisticated counterinsurgency can mask that in the eyes of many Afghans, we are foreign occupiers with our own imperial designs. Nor can it make up for the many shortcomings of what is seen as the illegitimate and dysfunctional regime of President Hamid Karzai, which has tried to centralize power (and wealth) at the expense of outlying provinces and has stolen the recent election. After immense international pressure, Karzai finally agreed to a runoff with his main competitor. That's a positive development, but it doesn't go nearly far enough in reforming the corrupt power structure. We should know that turning an illegitimate government into a legitimate one is beyond our capabilities—and that fighting extremists the Afghan government and army won't fight is a fool's errand.

Understandably, a majority of Americans have turned against the war. The number will grow as the costs and burdens become more evident. Under the right conditions, the impulse to help Afghans build a better future is commendable, but something is wrong when it becomes so tied up with a flawed military strategy or when it diverts our attention and energy from the serious problems we face here and abroad.

We cannot ignore that we are a nation struggling to recover from a debilitating economic crisis, with ever larger problems and fewer resources to deal with them. We cannot ignore that the crisis has devastated millions of American families who need the government's help. The ballooning debt is forcing the administration to match every new expenditure with a spending cut. As a practical matter, that means every dollar we spend on the war in Afghanistan will be one less dollar to create jobs or provide health insurance at home, or to solve international problems.

Given these realities, how can a president who promised to renew the nation justify the immense cost that sending yet more troops to Afghanistan would entail? How can he do so on behalf of an Afghan government that is so corrupt and dysfunctional that it does not have the support of its own people? We believe the president should listen to the voices in Congress who are urging him to begin planning a responsible exit strategy.

Crafting Health Reform

On October 11 the trade group America's Health Insurance Plans took a page from North Korea—in hopes of strengthening its bargaining position, it showed the world it had nuclear weapons. AHIP's weapon of mass destruction was a report that threatened dramatic premium increases if reform legislation passes, a charge that could blow up healthcare reform. The report was based on a bogus analysis that selectively

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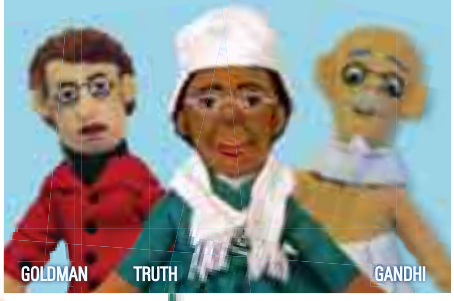

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ignored the provisions that would make coverage more affordable, and it was quickly discredited. It also won the insurers a scathing response from President Obama, who called them "deceptive and dishonest" in his weekly radio address.

After the Senate Finance Committee approved a reform package, healthcare reform finally looks less like a fantasy than a political probability. Whatever is in the legislation has a good chance of becoming law, and AHIP may not be the only group willing to fight to the death in order to shape the details to its liking.

COMMENT

Broadly speaking, there are three big things progressives should worry about. The most important is affordability. Sadly, Obama made himself a major impediment to providing needed subsidies to moderate-income Americans when he arbitrarily capped the cost of reform at $900 billion. That is simply not enough money to make healthcare affordable to everyone. In an ideal world, Congress would buck the president on this number; lawmakers should fight any effort to further trim the price tag.

The second question is how the bills will be financed, and there is a big gulf between the House and Senate. The largest source of new revenue in the Senate proposal is a tax on high-cost health insurance plans. This is more than just a funding mechanism—many economists believe that it will slow the growth of healthcare spending because it will reduce the incentive for employers to offer increasingly generous benefits packages. The House rejected such a tax on benefits, instead opting for a tax on families earning more than $350,000 a year.

Unions have long opposed any new tax on benefits and have launched an ad campaign decrying it as "a new tax on the middle class," most likely to hit "people who are older or sicker." There are problems with the Senate's proposal, but the unions' blanket opposition unjustifiably protects a regressive tax provision. Under current law, workers who receive employer benefits get them tax-free, but those who have to buy insurance on their own get no such tax break. This disproportionately benefits wealthier workers—almost half the benefits of this tax break go to the 24 percent who earn more than $75,000, while only 6 percent goes to those earning less than $20,000.

MIT economist Jonathan Gruber has a proposal that would address the unions' concerns by restricting the tax on above-average benefits to high-income workers. The best outcome might be to redesign the Senate's tax along Gruber's lines to make the tax code more progressive. This tax would collect less money than the Senate's more heavy-handed approach, and the House's new income tax could make up lost dollars.

Finally, of course, there is the public option, which has a dubious future in the Senate. The Finance Committee sacrificed a public option to win support from moderate Democrats and Maine's GOP Senator Olympia Snowe, whose votes may still be important to block a filibuster. Snowe has long argued for a compromise that triggers the creation of a public plan if the market leaves too many Americans without affordable healthcare. Other senators have floated proposals that allow states to decide for themselves whether to offer an alternative to private insurance.

Although giving states the option to create their own public plans is better than nothing, a trigger compromise might be a better option if it is enforceable and will create a national plan, ideally one tied to Medicare. State public plans may do some good in their local markets, but they won't have a national plan's muscle to slow the overall growth of medical spending.

Of course, the insurance industry's bogus report gives a powerful argument to the public option's champions: if the insurers are already predicting that premiums will rise under healthcare reform, they are admitting that they will not be able to achieve the savings necessary to slow overall cost growth. And the House may call their bluff—Speaker Nancy Pelosi has reaffirmed her support for a strong public option that would reduce costs by paying rates tied to the Medicare program. If the insurers are already pulling out their big guns, there is no reason Congress shouldn't fire back.

J. LESTER FEDER

J. Lester Feder, a freelance journalist based in Washington, DC, is a regular contributor to Columbia Journalism Review*'s Campaign Desk.*

Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

China Policy

1.

So why did President Obama
Decline to meet the Dalai Lama?
It's said that he must curry favor
With China. Yes, it has our waiver
To toss its people in the clink
For how they pray or what they think.
And we've resolved that we won't fret
About the way it rules Tibet.

2.

For going along when China's rotten
It's hard to think of what we've gotten.

Dem Doldrums in Gotham

The unemployment rate in New York City is higher than 10 percent, exceeding the national average. Each week finds more families entering the city's homeless shelter system, and the city's once-mighty manufacturing sector has shrunk to a paltry 2 percent of the job market. Such indicators suggest that the future of the city's economy should be at the forefront of the mayor's race. Democrats should be troubled that it is not.

COMMENT

Whatever his party label, Mayor Michael Bloomberg's firmest loyalties are to Wall Street and the financial sector. Early in his first term he went to court to stop the City Council from cracking down on subprime lending. More

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recently, amid the uproar over the financial sector bailout, he positioned himself as Wall Street's champion, defending exorbitant bonuses and claiming that Timothy Geithner "walks on water." Throughout his two terms, Bloomberg has promoted development oriented around luxury condos as the middle class has been squeezed out of the city. Meanwhile the low-wage retail sector has become the main area of job growth for New York's working class.

That Bloomberg's Democratic challenger, Bill Thompson, has been the city's comptroller for the past eight years makes his unwillingness to challenge the mayor's economic blueprint all the more puzzling. Aside from hammering Bloomberg for overturning term limits, Thompson has other lines of attack, containing varying degrees of economic critique: he has gone after the mayor, the richest person in the city, for his self-financed campaign spending, which outpaces Thompson 16 to 1; and he has assailed the mayor's preference for raising sales taxes and city fees rather than income taxes on the wealthy. Yet none of these positions suggest a clear new direction for the city's economy.

There are plenty of ideas out there that Thompson could spotlight. Earlier this year, a progressive coalition of unions, immigrants' rights groups and think tanks issued a blueprint called "One City, One Future." Given that the "finance sector is likely to emerge from the current meltdown much smaller in scale," the report calls for building up other components of the local economy. Many of its recommendations center around a living wage, which would give service-sector workers a much-needed pay boost. Though he signed a wage increase for healthcare workers in his first term, Bloomberg does not support full-scale local living-wage legislation, arguing that hikes should be handled at the state and federal levels—which ignores New York City's high cost of living. Thompson—despite being endorsed by the Working Families Party, a key player in the One City coalition—has not made such legislation a centerpiece of his campaign.

Thompson most certainly could take cues from other cities. San Francisco and Santa Fe have passed a city living wage with no adverse effect on their economies. In Los Angeles, living-wage jobs and affordable housing are required components of any economic development project that receives public funding. Security guards in Washington, DC, now receive a living wage plus benefits, while San Francisco's successful universal healthcare program has helped lift the growing financial burdens on urban working people. There is also the question of what to do with the unspent stimulus money, which many believe could help kick-start the growth of green jobs in urban areas.

Thompson, though, has not spoken forcefully on behalf of these or any other innovative proposals. His campaign literature states that, as mayor, he would "put New Yorkers back to work by creating long-term, good-paying jobs." But in his first debate with Bloomberg, Thompson did not even raise the issue of the city's growing unemployment rate, let alone offer solutions to the problem. Sadly, he seems willing to stoke populist resentment against Bloomberg without offering a substantive alternative.

Barring an unexpected outpouring of voter outrage against the mayor, New Yorkers are likely to see four more years of Bloomberg, which would extend Republican control over City Hall to twenty years. In the 1990s Rudy Giuliani and his "quality of life" policing put Democrats on the defensive; over the past eight years, Bloomberg (again allied with Giuliani) has moved to the forefront of education reform. The result is that even in their own backyard, local Democrats no longer control the urban agenda. By putting forth progressive economic policies, Dems may one day regain their groove. THEODORE HAMM

Theodore Hamm, editor of The Brooklyn Rail, *is an associate professor of urban studies at Metropolitan College of New York.*

Devil in the Old Dominion

COMMENT

If any state can claim to sit smack in the bull's-eye of American politics, it's Virginia. Practically everything screams "middle": a divided economy and culture, with thriving but anxious suburban haves and struggling rural have-nots; split partisan preferences, with growing ranks of independent swingers; demographics in flux, with swelling numbers of Asian-Americans and Latinos; and pendulous politics, with Republicans having dominated the 1990s and Democrats thriving in the 2000s. When Barack Obama became the first Democratic presidential nominee in forty-four years to carry the state, he did it with 53 percent of the vote—same as the country. So it's no wonder that everybody is looking to Virginia's off-year gubernatorial contest as a Middle American barometer for 2010. And the needle is pointing tentatively rightward.

With the president's approval ratings having plunged twenty points since January in this fiscally conservative state, and with outgoing Democratic Governor Tim Kaine's popularity sagging beneath the weight of budgetary woes, Democratic candidate Creigh Deeds has clawed uphill all the way against telegenic Republican Bob McDonnell. An ex-military graduate of Pat Robertson's Regent University, McDonnell has run a lavishly funded campaign that could be a template—slick, deceptive and wickedly effective—for a GOP revival in other purple states.

Virginians have long prided themselves on being allergic to ideologues. Up against a moderate like Deeds, a longtime state legislator, a Christian-right champion like McDonnell is left with just one option: all-out obfuscation. This is the guy, after all, who in 1989 wrote a now-infamous master's thesis at Regent—intended as a governing playbook for Republicans—that called working women "detrimental" to the family; demanded that government "restrain, punish, and deter" homosexuality; and ridiculed "conventional folklore about the separation of church and state." It wasn't just talk: in the Statehouse and the AG's office, McDonnell's sole mission was enacting the agenda he outlined in that thesis. He introduced thirty-five measures to restrict abortion rights. He championed (to little avail) "covenant marriage," school vouchers and tax policies designed to bolster his view of the traditional family. The list goes on. But in this campaign, McDonnell has recast himself as a problem-solving, Chamber of Commerce–style Republican obsessed with jobs and transportation—the most pressing issues, respectively, in economically strapped Southern Virginia and traffic-choked North-

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ern Virginia. McDonnell speaks no evil of Obama. But he has skillfully deployed national controversies to help distract voters' attention from his pre-modern social views.

Deeds, who's trailed steadily by single digits all fall, knows the fix he's in. "Whenever there's a new administration and they're trying new things, they're gonna ruffle some feathers," he told me in mid-September, bumping toward another campaign event. "That's why the other guy in the race is doing the best he can to focus the election on federal issues. So we fight over the nuances of cap-and-trade and the Employee Free Choice Act instead of what's going on in Virginia." That, combined with Obama's droopy poll numbers, has landed Deeds in a Catch-22 likely to ensnare many a Democrat in 2010. "If I'm real critical of the president, I'll undercut the Democratic base," Deeds says. "And if I avoid the question and say it's moot, they'll say these issues are important and why won't you talk about them?"

The quandary had been spotlighted a few days earlier, at the Fairfax Chamber of Commerce debate, when the moderator asked whether Deeds considered himself an "Obama Democrat." After some hemming and hawing, the candidate replied, "I'm a Creigh Deeds Democrat." Trouble is, nobody knows exactly what that means. Many progressives have been wary of his legislative record, which often reflected the conservatism of his rural roots. Until the 2007 massacre at Virginia Tech, he was an ardent opponent of gun control. Deeds also raised liberal hackles by voting for a 2006 referendum denying marriage rights to gay couples. More damaging, Deeds has failed to articulate a resonant message on kitchen-table issues, allowing McDonnell to keep the debate focused on the Democrat's support for "job-killing" cap-and-trade and the Employee Free Choice Act.

Even with Obama, Bill Clinton, Al Gore and Joe Biden stumping for Deeds, Virginia Democrats badly need firing up, so soon after the unprecedented grassroots war they waged in 2008, when they helped register and turn out a whopping half-million new voters. One poll this fall showed that only 60 percent of the black voters who keyed Obama's victory are likely to show up for Deeds. Republicans, on the other hand, are pumped. McDonnell's slick trick—quietly sticking to his fundamentalist views while chanting the mantras of "jobs" and "free enterprise"—has given both factions of his party plenty to get juiced about.

It's easy to exaggerate the symbolic import of this race. But if Deeds were to eke out a victory through a last-minute surge, it would signify that Democrats have achieved a durable measure of dominance in this most middling of states. With the likelier result, a McDonnell win, the message would be less emphatic but still resonant: a Republican who doesn't come off like a tea-party wing nut or a Rick Santorum theocrat can still win in Purple America. And the next name you'd hear touted loudly as a presidential prospect in 2012 would surely be that of a blue-eyed, blond-haired, silver-tongued devil named McDonnell.

BOB MOSER

Bob Moser, a Nation *contributing writer, is editor of* The Texas Observer *and author of* Blue Dixie: Awakening the South's Democratic Majority.

Noted.

AFGHAN ACTION: If you're a student, join **Students for a Democratic Society**, which has created a website for its antiwar working group (sdsantiwar.wordpress.com), and the **Campus Antiwar Network** (campusantiwar.net), which holds teach-ins, debates, demonstrations and walkouts on high school and college campuses.

Write, phone, e-mail and fax your elected representatives and President Obama, and implore them to say no to Gen. **Stanley McChrystal**'s request to send 40,000 more troops to Afghanistan. Urge them to support **Barbara Lee**'s bill (HR 3699) to prohibit any increase in the US armed forces and to co-sponsor **Jim McGovern**'s resolution (HR 2404) calling on the defense secretary to outline an exit strategy.

Watch **Robert Greenwald**'s *Rethink Afghanistan* for free at rethinkafghanistan.com, then get a copy of the DVD and host a screening yourself. You can also invite your elected reps and their staffers to watch the film, and post one of the film's six segments to your Facebook page.

Play host to a Peace for Afghanistan house party with **Peace Action**. Go to peaceforafghanistan.org for hosting tips or to find a party near you. The Peace Action website (peace-action.org) also has "A Better Plan for Afghan Peace" petition.

Add your name to **Code Pink**'s call for an exit strategy, and see the "Women Say NO to War" section of its website (other genders also welcome), CodePink4Peace.org, which features a calendar of antiwar events.

Sign the **Campaign for Peace and Democracy**'s emergency statement calling for an end to military intervention in the region and an infusion of humanitarian aid instead (cpdweb.org).

Join peace groups like the **War Resisters League**, **American Friends Service Committee**, **Military Families Speak Out**, **Win Without War** and **Peace Action West**. And check out United for Peace's site (unitedforpeace.org) to find out about upcoming demonstrations, rallies, vigils and other actions.

Support anti-escalation Afghan groups working for women's rights and social justice, like the **Afghan Women's Mission**, **MADRE** and the **Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan** (RAWA).

Tell your friends and family about the **National Priorities Project**'s cost-of-war tickers (costofwar.com), which keep a running tally of the national, state and local costs of our military ventures. Write to media outlets, local and national, to provide nonmilitary perspectives.

Support the troops who refuse to fight, like **Travis Bishop**, currently serving a twelve-month sentence for refusing deployment to Afghanistan. Find out how at couragetoresist.org.

Visit our special page at thenation.com/afghanistan-in-crisis for the best in *The Nation*'s Afghanistan coverage. And go to thenation.com/blogs/actnow for an expanded version of this article with links to each project. ANDREA D'CRUZ AND PETER ROTHBERG

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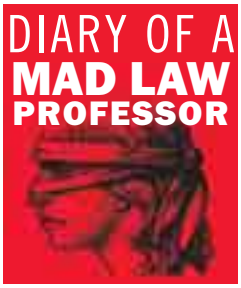
Patricia J. Williams

Nobel Peace Sparks War

Statistics show that there is a marked uptick in the amount of genuinely hateful yammering one finds in public and political discourse.

"Interactive" media are all well and good, but there does seem to be a recurring motif of pointlessly fulminating ping-pong, no matter what the subject at hand. Someone writes an article. Some readers like it, some readers don't. At first they fling praise or invective at the author, but soon they're calling one another political poopy-heads and snarling about who's stupider than whom. Then it goes from being accusative in the singular (you're an idiot) to the stereotyped plural (your kind are all idiots).

Rush Limbaugh has applied this schoolyard Punch and Judy narrative to every topic he touches. But it has also been spread by "reality" TV and extends from Jon and Kate to Congressman Joe Wilson. Donald Rumsfeld was masterful at it, and George W. Bush used it to suck the air out of every diplomatic space he entered. As a national discourse, it's silly and uninformative. When elevated to the level of international relations, it has been disastrous, as clichés like "You're either with us or against us" have shown.



I say all this because I think that the art of diplomacy is something that has become largely invisible to us in the United States. We value directness, even where it insults someone; we want instant responses, even where answers don't come easily. Diplomacy, a carefully choreographed ballet with words, is quite foreign to our perceptions of the world. We tend not to think about strategies of approach and deflection, negotiation and accommodation, patience and translation, and care in choice of words combined with pointedly applied pressure.

This was certainly evident in the response to President Obama's having been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Lots of sniffing about his readiness, lots of disparagement about his "pretty words" and "empty promises." And then, of course, the formulaic fights: he's a wizardy warlord with the power of hypnosis! He's a dangerous con man whose only gift is charisma. You're wrong! You're wronger! Dope slaps all around!

It's helpful to consider exactly why President Obama was cited. It was given to him, said the Nobel judges, for his having "created a new climate in international politics." "Only very rarely has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future." Indeed, Obama has brought the United States back to the status of the most admired nation in the world, based on a survey of thousands of people in twenty countries around the globe.

Some commentators have chalked this up to Obama's silver tongue, as though great oratory is inherently about smoke and mirrors, emptiness and hype. But what Obama has done is nothing less than steer our huge ship of state back from the brink of "preventive war" and economic free fall. He restored competing theories of constitutional interpretation. No longer is the executive branch battling in a different textual universe: between due process and none at all; between the courts and images from *24*; between privacy and supersurveillance; between accountability and official holes of dark secrecy.

These are serious accomplishments, with pragmatic consequences. As just one small example, after Obama was elected 1.6 million South Africans registered to vote. Maybe that just doesn't matter to many Americans, but diplomacy is the art of creating a geography where citizens and their leaders can develop means of negotiating with one another. Around 90 percent of Britons, French and Germans believe that Obama has affirmatively changed the course of diplomacy and that the United States is now a superpower that listens. The guiding question, the committee reminded us, was, "Who has done the most to enhance peace in the preceding year?" To enhance peace—that's the standard. It is not the impossible metric of ending all wars, of delivering peace on earth, right now. The committee summarized its conclusion succinctly: "Who has done more than Barack Obama?"

So how do you turn that into a negative? The headline in the *Chicago Tribune* read, "Europeans Honor US President for Not Being Bush." The *New York Times* sniffed, "Normally the prize has been presented, even controversially, for accomplishment"—making it quite clear the editors thought Obama had accomplished nothing at all. Everywhere, it seemed, the prize was described as "a political liability," "a mixed blessing," a "poison chalice," a reminder of the "gap" between his "star power" and "actual achievements." The prize was figured as somehow devalued by the choice, as though when this man enters the space of the world's highest honor, the property values fall. It was suddenly a European socialist foreign thing rather than a global honor, and therefore one more sign that Obama is not one of "us."

Whether or not Obama was your personal pick, the Nobel Peace Prize surely confers honor on our president, on America's reputation and on us, the people. Among left and right, there's a kind of shortsightedness of ingratitude and a failure to acknowledge the degree to which Obama's carefully constructed rhetorical interventions have created a new diplomatic space.

The words of an American president matter. The executive power is nothing more than the ability to craft policy, guide action, provide direction—all with words, and all with consequences for the future of the world. So Obama's Nobel Peace Prize is something all Americans should feel good about, a reassurance that we are moving toward a light, a globally hailed goal of prosperity and nuclear disarmament. It speaks to the unfortunate power of our "It's a Good Thing! It's an Evil Thing! Slimeball! Sucker!" habits of thinking, however, that not a single US newspaper I could find had a headline with anything as simple as: "Congratulations, Mr. President! Congratulations to Us, Every One!" ■

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Eric Alterman

Just Don't Call It 'Journalism'

It's a sad symbol of the state of contemporary American journalism that the White House communications office is doing more to maintain the honor of the profession than are many journalists. But that's just what's happening in the contretemps over Fox News. Interim White House communications director Anita Dunn has explained to the press that the White House plans to treat Fox "the way we would treat an opponent.... As they are undertaking a war against Barack Obama and the White House, we don't need to pretend that this is the way that legitimate news organizations behave."

But many in Washington prefer to pretend. Howard Kurtz, whose talent for clueless conventional thinking is exceeded only by his ability to juggle his myriad conflicts of interest, thinks Obama's reaction to Fox is no different from JFK's complaints about the *Herald Tribune*, LBJ's unhappiness with the *New York Times* and various (and endless) Republican attacks on the media, so he finds it "no surprise that the Obama White House isn't happy with its coverage and is battling back." *Baltimore Sun* critic David Zurawik professes to hear "echoes of Nixon-Agnew" in the Obama White House and then accuses the administration of failing to "respect press freedom." The *Times*'s David Carr concludes, "So far, the only winner in this latest dispute seems to be Fox News. Ratings are up 20 percent this year, and the network basked for a week in the antagonism of a sitting president."

What all these critics fail to address is that the administration's argument is right on the merits. Fox's pretense of being an actual news network is hardly more convincing than, say, Milton Berle in a bra and garters posing as a woman. By refusing to acknowledge Fox's open and avowed partisanship, its MSM defenders are not only flacking for Ailes & Co.; they're diminishing the work of honest journalists who try to play fair. Ask yourself:

§ Would a genuine news network reproduce a Republican press release, replete with typos?

§ Would a genuine news network run, over a five-day period, twenty-two excerpts from healthcare forums in which every single speaker was opposed?

§ Would a genuine news network allow a producer to cheerlead, off camera, anti-Obama protesters?

§ Would a genuine news network take out full-page ads to complain of insufficient coverage of antigovernment protest marches it had promoted?

§ Would a genuine news network run the following headlines, trumpeting each story as a "Fox Nation Victory"?

Senate Removes 'End of Life' Provision
Congress Delays Health Care Rationing Bill
Anti-Tea Party Reporter Dumped by CNN
Obama's Drive for Climate Change Bill Delayed
Obama's 'Green Czar' Resigns

(Note: I have not had to quote the lunatic ravings of Messrs. Beck, Hannity or O'Reilly to make my case.)

Fox is not a news organization; it is a propaganda outlet, and an extremist one at that. Is it any wonder that according to survey after survey, Fox News viewers are among the worst informed Americans when it comes to politics, despite their obsessive interest? A recent study by Democracy Corps finds that this audience believes "Obama is deliberately and ruthlessly advancing a 'secret agenda' to bankrupt our country and dramatically expand government control over all aspects of our daily lives," with the ultimate goal of "the destruction of the United States as it was conceived by our founders and developed over the past 200 years."

There is something to be said for collecting all the crazies in one place. As conservative pundit Reihan Salam argued on behalf of the nuttiness of Glenn Beck, his value lies in the fact that "he's a kind of national therapist for some of America's craziest people, few of whom are willing to go in for professional help." And so it's nice that ABC's John Stossel has migrated to his natural home at Fox and Lou Dobbs is said to be in talks to take his racist rants over there as well.

But the danger increases when the rest of the media allow this particularly swine-ish flu to infect their news operations, and this is the White House's legitimate concern. Why was George Stephanopoulos taking up valuable time in his interview with the President of the United States badgering him about ACORN? ("George, this is not the biggest issue facing the country. It's not something I'm paying a lot of attention to," was Obama's entirely appropriate response.) And why did Stephanopoulos persistently pester the president, in the same interview, about whether a transformational reform of our dysfunctional healthcare system—which is on its way to eating up 20 percent of the entire GDP—could be reduced to the Republican-friendly sound bite "a tax increase"? (Is it surprising that the interview made its way into an RNC attack ad the very next week?) Is the fear of Fox making its way through ABC's corporate bloodstream? Recently David Axelrod appeared on Stephanopoulos's program and schooled him on the stakes involved: "It's really not news—it's pushing a point of view. And...other news organizations like yours ought not to treat them that way."

I suppose we can be grateful that Obama has not been asked lately about his flag pin; but it's a sad day when our big media pooh-bahs need instruction on the values and responsibilities of their own profession by political operatives. No one's asking to censor Fox, but a little shame and scorn ought to go a long way. This, thankfully, is one of the concurrent crises facing the profession that journalists can fix all by themselves, and perhaps restore a bit of their self-respect in the process. ■

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AFGHANISTAN: A SPECIAL ISSUE

OBAMA'S FATEFUL CHOICE

Much like the debate surrounding the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the discussion on the best course of US policy in Afghanistan is distorted by a number of faulty assumptions, if not outright myths. The essays in this forum call into question many of those assumptions and offer a different way of looking at the crisis in Afghanistan and Pakistan and what is at stake for the people of the region and for the United States.

The principal rationale for America's expanding military commitment in Afghanistan is that a Taliban takeover there would directly threaten US security because it would again become a safe haven for Al Qaeda to plot attacks against the United States. But the essays by Stephen Walt and John Mueller strongly refute that assumption, pointing out that a Taliban victory would not necessarily mean a return of Al Qaeda to Afghanistan, and that in any case the strategic value of Afghanistan and Pakistan as base camps for Al Qaeda is greatly exaggerated and can be easily countered.

Similarly, proponents of sending more troops to Afghanistan argue that Taliban success would embolden global jihadists everywhere and destabilize Pakistan in particular. Yet, as the essays by Selig Harrison and Priya Satia show, this narrative does not fit the realities. While American policy-makers and Al Qaeda may think of this as a grand meta-struggle between the United States and global jihadism, many Taliban fighters are motivated by other factors: by traditional Pashtun resistance to foreign occupation; by internal ethnic politics, such as rebellion against the Tajik-dominated government of Hamid Karzai; or by anger over the loss of life resulting from American/NATO aerial attacks that have gone awry.

As for Pakistan, the essays by Manan Ahmed and Mosharraf Zaidi explain why the Taliban threat to Pakistan is not as serious as many assume, and why a newly democratic Pakistan has turned increasingly against Islamist extremists. As Ahmed and Zaidi suggest, Pakistanis are quite capable of defending their country—not for American interests but for their own reasons—and Pakistani stability is more likely to be threatened than enhanced by military escalation in Afghanistan.

And finally, Robert Dreyfuss offers an exit strategy: as it winds down its counterinsurgency, Washington should encourage an international Bonn II conference that would lead to a new national compact in Afghanistan. —*The Editors*

High Costs, Long Odds

STEPHEN M. WALT

Deciding what to do in Afghanistan requires a hard-nosed assessment of the costs of the war, the alleged benefits of victory and the likelihood of success.

We know the price will be high. The United States has spent more than $223 billion on the Afghan war since 2001, and it now costs roughly $65 billion annually. The actual bill will be significantly higher, however, as these figures omit the replacement cost of military equipment, veterans' benefits and other war-related expenses. Most important, more than 850 US soldiers have already been killed and several thousand have been seriously wounded.

And we are not close to winning. The Obama administration admits that the challenges are "daunting," and a recent pro-war report from the Center for American Progress said success will require "prolonged U.S. engagement using all elements of U.S. national power" for "as long as another ten years." Success also requires creating an army and police force larger than the Afghan government can afford, which means Kabul will need US assistance indefinitely.

The bottom line: staying in Afghanistan will cost many more dead American soldiers—and, inevitably, Afghan civilians—and hundreds of billions of additional dollars.

But might the benefits be worth the costs? President Obama says we have to prevent Afghanistan from becoming "an even larger safe haven from which Al Qaeda would plot to kill more Americans." But defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan isn't the key to thwarting Al Qaeda. Indeed, even if our counterinsurgency and nation-building efforts exceed all expectations, the Afghan government will still have only limited authority over much of the country and will be unable to prevent Al Qaeda cells from relocating there.

Moreover, Al Qaeda doesn't need lots of territory or elaborate bases to plot attacks and other conspiracies; all it needs are safe houses in various parts of the world and a supply of potential martyrs. Al Qaeda clones already exist in Yemen, Somalia and elsewhere; so denying its founders a "safe haven" in Afghanistan will not make that network less lethal. If Al Qaeda is our main concern, fighting in Afghanistan is increasingly a distraction.

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Finally, America's odds of winning this war are slim. The Karzai government is corrupt, incompetent and resistant to reform. The Taliban have sanctuaries in Pakistan and can hide among the local populace, making it possible for them simply to outlast us. Pakistan has backed the Afghan Taliban in the past and is not a reliable partner now. Our European allies are war-weary and looking for the exits. The more troops we send and the more we interfere in Afghan affairs, the more we look like foreign occupiers and the more resistance we will face. There is therefore little reason to expect a US victory.

Fortunately, pulling US troops out of Afghanistan will not make Al Qaeda stronger. If the Taliban regain power, they may conclude it is too risky to let Osama bin Laden return. But even if they did, a backward and landlocked country like Afghanistan is a poor location from which to attack the United States, which is why the 9/11 plot was conducted out of Hamburg, Germany. If Al Qaeda's founders have to hide somewhere, better in Afghanistan than anywhere else.

And hide they will, because Afghanistan won't be a safe haven. Bin Laden could operate somewhat freely there before 9/11, because the United States wasn't going after him all-out. Those days are long gone. The Taliban will not be able to protect him from US commandos, cruise missiles and armed drones. He and his henchmen will always have to stay in hiding, which is why even an outright Taliban victory will not enhance their position very much.

In short, US victory in Afghanistan won't put an end to Al Qaeda, and getting out won't make it more dangerous. And if the outcome in Afghanistan has little effect on the threat Al Qaeda poses, there is little reason to squander more American blood and treasure there.

Obama's decision should be easy, given that the costs of the war are rising, the benefits are few and the odds of success are small. If he explains that calculus to the American people and says it is time to leave, most of them will agree.

Stephen M. Walt, Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of International Affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, is a contributing editor at Foreign Policy.

The 'Safe Haven' Myth

JOHN MUELLER

Richard Holbrooke, America's special envoy to South Asia, maintains that if the Taliban succeed in Afghanistan, "without any shadow of a doubt, Al Qaeda would move back into Afghanistan, set up a larger presence, recruit more people and pursue its objectives against the United States even more aggressively." That, he insisted, is "the only justification for what we're doing." This is an especially ardent presentation of the "base camp," or "safe haven," myth. Stressed by virtually all promoters of the war, this key justification—indeed, the *only* one, according to Holbrooke—has gone almost entirely unexamined.

Although some terrorist attacks since 9/11 have had "links" or "strings" or "threads" to Al Qaeda, and although some have probably been inspired by its example, it seems likely that there have been no fully developed operations by Al Qaeda central anywhere in the world since 2001, even though the group's leaders have repeatedly threatened to carry them out in the United States and elsewhere. The myth essentially contends that although 9/11 was substantially plotted in Hamburg, just about the only reason further attacks haven't taken place is that Al Qaeda needs a bigger base of operations in Afghanistan.

In 2001 Al Qaeda was a fringe group of a fringe group, and reactions around the world by policing organizations to 9/11 and to subsequent terrorism by its occasional imitators have caused it to become a shadow of what it was then. In all, intelligence estimates of Al Qaeda central put its numbers at a few hundred. The group could still be dangerous, of course, and it does try to assist at least one of the Taliban groups, but its problems do not stem from not having enough space in which to operate or plan.

Actually, it is not clear that Al Qaeda would even want to establish a base camp in a war-ravaged, impoverished, insecure and factionalized Afghanistan. American efforts to go after it in Pakistan are hampered by concerns about the sensitivities of the Pakistanis. There would be no such constraints in a Talibanized Afghanistan. It's difficult to see how an Afghan "haven" would be safer than the one Al Qaeda occupies now. In fact, Douglas Saunders of Canada's *Globe and Mail* reports that most allied commanders in Afghanistan he's talked with think it "very unlikely" that Al Qaeda would establish a base there even if the Taliban were to take over.

The terrorist group also has problems with Mullah Omar's original Taliban, the one that controlled the country in the 1990s and, according to the recent report from US Gen. Stanley McChrystal, is the most threatening of the Taliban groups and the only one to establish what the report calls "major elements of governance" in portions of the country.

Saunders reports that Omar is "very much opposed" to Al Qaeda. This is plausible because, as sources like Lawrence Wright's prizewinning book *The Looming Tower* make clear, the relationship between the two groups was often very uncomfortable. The Taliban never invited Osama bin Laden to the country in the first place; and when in residence from 1996 to 2001, he repeatedly broke pledges to refrain from issuing messages and from engaging in terrorist activities. According to a senior Taliban official bin Laden was, in the words of a CNN reporter, "a pain in the backside."

There are reports that Omar's group has made clear its rupture with Al Qaeda in talks with Saudi Arabia, which was almost the only country to support the Taliban in the 1990s and whose support the Taliban would need in order to have even a prayer of establishing coherent government in Afghanistan. For nearly twenty years now, the Saudi regime has been bin Laden's number-one enemy, and the Saudis tried several times to have him extradited in the 1990s.

Unlike Al Qaeda, Omar has a very localized perspective. The last thing he would need, should he take over Afghanistan, is an active terrorist group continually drawing fire from the outside. As Richard Barrett, the UN's Taliban and Al Qaeda monitor, says of the Taliban, "They don't want Al Qaeda hanging around."

In many ways the "safe haven" myth is like the "dominance" myth repeatedly promulgated by promoters of the war in Iraq.

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That one held that if Saddam Hussein could just lay his hands on a chemical bomb or two, or maybe on fancier "weapons of mass destruction," he would be able to "dominate" the Middle East. Rarely considered were the inconvenient facts that the impoverished, hated and pathetic dictator controlled only a shard of his country and that he so distrusted his army (which he would presumably need to "dominate") that he issued it little ammunition and wouldn't allow it to enter Baghdad with heavy equipment.

John Mueller is a professor of political science at Ohio State University. His book Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism From Hiroshima to Al Qaeda *has just been published by Oxford University Press.*

The Ethnic Split

SELIG S. HARRISON

Alexander the Great, the British Raj and the Red Army all learned the hard way that the Pashtuns, Afghanistan's largest and historically dominant ethnic group, will unite to fight a foreign occupation force simply because it is foreign. As Howard Hart, a former CIA station chief in Pakistan, recently told the *New York Times*, "The very presence of our forces in the Pashtun areas is the problem. The more troops we put in, the greater the opposition."

The tenacity of the Taliban insurgency is rooted in opposition to an occupation that is, in this case, a particularly distasteful one to the Pashtuns. The US infidel is hated for Persian Gulf and Middle East policies—especially unconditional US support for Israel—that are perceived as anti-Muslim. But there are other factors that explain the strength of the Taliban. Some are widely written about, like drug money, popular anger at corrupt warlords and support from Pakistani intelligence agencies.

One factor of special sensitivity and importance that receives almost no attention either in the public debate about Afghanistan or in the internal policy battles of the Obama administration may well be the most important of all: the domination of the Afghan armed forces, police, secret police and intelligence agencies by leaders of the Tajik ethnic minority, who use their US-backed power in Kabul to lord it over their historic Pashtun rivals.

Pashtun kings ruled Afghanistan from its inception in 1747 until the overthrow of the monarchy in 1973. Initially limited to the Pashtun heartland in the south and east, the Afghan state gradually conquered the neighboring Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek areas to the north and west. Today the Pashtuns make up an estimated 42 percent of a population of 28 million; the Tajiks make up 27 percent. Yet Tajik generals hold the key levers of power in Kabul because they happened to be in the right place at the right time during the confused months when US forces overthrew the Taliban in 2001.

During the struggle against the Soviet occupation, the Tajiks built up a militia in the Panjshir Valley, north of Kabul, that had close CIA ties. Later it acquired allies in neighboring areas and became the Northern Alliance, which fought the Pashtun-based Taliban government that ruled from 1996 until 2001. When the victorious US forces marched into Kabul, the Northern Alliance was there, too, and with US help a clique of Tajik generals seized the key security posts in the new government.

The Bush administration, wanting to give a Pashtun face to the initial interim government, installed Hamid Karzai as president. He, too, had longstanding CIA ties and was the only Pashtun leader acceptable to the Tajik in-group headed by Gen. Muhammad Fahim. Fahim vetoed other more popular Pashtun figures identified with the last Pashtun king, Zahir Shah, notably Abdul Sattar Sirat. The United States later blocked Pashtun efforts to make Zahir Shah president of the second transitional government, which ruled from 2002 until a constitution was adopted and Karzai was elected president in 2004.

Now the Tajiks are riding high. In Karzai's recent bid for a second term (in elections widely regarded as rigged), Fahim was his running mate as first vice president. Army chief of staff Bismillah Khan has made fellow Tajiks his key corps commanders, and some 70 percent of his battalion commanders are Tajiks, making it difficult to enlist Pashtuns. The Tajik-dominated National Security Directorate, a sprawling network of intelligence and secret police agencies, systematically harasses Pashtun leaders who seek to challenge Tajik control. And if Karzai's challenger, Abdullah Abdullah, a half-Tajik and longtime Northern Alliance insider, shares power in a coalition government or wins a runoff, Tajik dominance would be strengthened.

The United States has painted itself into a corner in Afghanistan from which there can be no graceful escape. If it seeks to end Tajik dominance and shifts to a pro-Pashtun policy, there could well be a Tajik backlash and an uncontrollable, ethnically defined civil war. Yet a continuation of the status quo will only deepen Pashtun discontent.

What can be done now?

First, set a timetable for the gradual withdrawal of US and NATO forces during the next three years, limiting their role to the protection of major cities and of communications arteries critical to the defense of Kabul. This is the necessary condition for identifying the Taliban factions prepared to negotiate peace agreements at the local level with Pashtun tribal leaders.

Second, to offset Pakistan's support for the Taliban, replace the present "Af-Pak" strategy with a broader regional strategy that encourages India, Iran, Russia, China and Tajikistan—all of which oppose a Taliban takeover—to play a more active role in shaping Afghanistan's economic and political future and in setting the terms for a gradual US-NATO withdrawal.

Selig S. Harrison has covered Afghanistan since 1963. A former South Asia bureau chief of the Washington Post, *he is the author of* Out of Afghanistan *and* In Afghanistan's Shadow. *He is director of the Asia Program at the Center for International Policy.*

Attack of the Drones

PRIYA SATIA

"Attack of the Drones," a homage to the lesser of the *Star Wars* trilogies, is the headline of choice in reports on the One Good Thing to come out of the "war on terror": very cool gadgets. With the media stoking laddish pleasure in "weapons porn" (*Newsweek*'s phrase), we might be forgiven for forgetting that this "greatest, weirdest, coolest hardware in the American arsenal"

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has neither brought the war to a swifter end nor enabled the capture of archenemy Osama bin Laden.

Indeed, behind the glittering mirage of news about the technological wizardry of drones and the giddy success of manufacturers from California to Karachi lies a chilling void of information about their use. In June the UN Human Rights Council condemned the US failure to count and disclose, much less prevent, civilian casualties from drones in Afghanistan. Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the US commander in Afghanistan, pledged to regulate their use (implying a disturbing lack of regulation till then). But the government still refuses to share even the most basic information about attacks, partly because in Pakistan they are run by the CIA. Independent reporters who dare to investigate—like Stephen Farrell, who went to Kunduz after an airstrike killed about a hundred civilians—court death as well as condemnation for taking "unnecessary" risks for something as trivial as the truth.

The US military's certainty of the drones' effectiveness is difficult to take on trust, when it neither counts nor identifies those killed. It claims a number of top Al Qaeda officials have been hit but provides no answer to the Pakistani figure of nearly 700 civilian deaths in Pakistan alone since 2006. Official secrecy fuels rumors of the worst, and scandals like the September 4 Kunduz massacre prove that often the worst is true. Regulation cannot solve the practical problem, so evident that day, of identifying bad guys in a war-torn society in which fuel tankers captured by the Taliban attract a range of youths willing to siphon off free fuel at 2:30 AM.

Afghans are cynical (and wise) enough to assume from past experience that the secrecy covers up facts too grisly for public airing. Aerial counterinsurgency was invented in the Pakistani-Afghan borderland and Iraq by the British in the 1920s. Then, as now, it was a means of fighting insurgency without public scrutiny. Then, as now, no one counted the dead. British MPs pressed futilely for "particulars of where and why these bombardments have taken place…[and] whether inhabitants have been killed." Despite the government's twisted assurance that the regime worked primarily through "terror," bombardment was used routinely even for tax collection—the sort of perversion only Orwell could capture: "Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*." It failed miserably: anger at civilian deaths and continual foreign surveillance provoked frequent insurgency, mistrust of local governments and the anxiety about Western imperialism that led to our present discontents.

Americans who are confused by the grotesque transformation of the modest aim of capturing a few bad men into a conflagration that has destroyed the lives of millions echo the *Guardian* of the 1920s, which asked why the British government had to send "all this machinery, all these forces…if we were establishing a political system on the basis of popular consent?" To make this skeptical public more "air-minded," the Air Ministry produced the glamorous image of the warrior-airman, which today's press is obligingly updating with the sexy robotics and thermal dynamics of drones. Without distinguishing between drones that protect our troops and those that drop bombs and hover menacingly over an occupied people, *The Economist* taunts, "like them or not, drones are here to stay."

But they needn't be: some experts in the media echo chamber realize that behind the awesome special effects is a pretty weak story. Lord Bingham, a retired senior British judge, compares hunter-killer drones to cluster bombs and land mines, weapons that have been deemed too cruel for use; and David Kilcullen, a counterinsurgency expert and former adviser in Iraq, calls their hit rate immoral.

But time is running out. Drone surveillance is fast becoming the excuse for an extended American presence over Iraq and Afghanistan, if not on the ground, making the spoken objective of state-building a canard.

Airstrikes, manned or unmanned, regulated or not, cannot build a better Afghan future. For every decapitated Al Qaeda leader, ten angry and desperate dupes join up. In their pursuit of a better technique of bombardment, General McChrystal, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and President Obama have forgotten the all-important politics of bombardment. While eagerly correlating any drop in US casualties with drone activity, they have missed the more revealing correlation between drone use, visceral hatred for the Kabul and Islamabad governments, and the expansion of the Taliban, who shrewdly portray their insurgency as nationalist resistance to the violence these governments connive in. As long as Afghans and Pakistanis see their governments as Janus-faced collaborators with the US military occupation, the governments will not be able to stand up, and US troops will not be able to stand down. Instead of sophomorically hailing the futuristic Attack of the Drones, it's time to revisit the homelier original, "A New Hope."

Priya Satia, the award-winning author of Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East, *is an assistant professor of history at Stanford University.*

Paranoia Over Pakistan

MANAN AHMED

The Taliban are "60 Miles From Islamabad," declared an alarmist editorial in the *New York Times* on April 27. A report that month from General Petraeus implied Pakistan was in grave danger. Pakistanis, according to the conventional wisdom at the time, were simply unable to understand their existential peril. Hence, the imperative rested with the United States to force the Pakistani army into action, and to redouble its own efforts to strike at the Taliban threat. After some dithering, and an appropriate amount of new military aid, the Pakistani army finally launched Operation Rah-e Rast (Operation Righteous Path) in Swat, which halted the Taliban "advance" but in actuality has resulted in millions of internally displaced civilians and a widening humanitarian crisis.

Simultaneously, the United States increased its unmanned drone missile strikes on specific targets, resulting in measured success (the reported killing of Baitullah Mehsud in August) but exacting a growing list of civilian casualties and widespread condemnation of the United States across Pakistan. Neither the

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About Your Professor

Dr. Arthur T. Benjamin is Professor of Mathematics at Harvey Mudd College. He

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earned his Ph.D. in Mathematical Sciences from Johns Hopkins University. The Mathematical Association of American has repeatedly honored Professor Benjamin's teaching with awards including the Deborah and Franklin Tepper Haimo National Award for Distinguished College or University Teaching of Mathematics.

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Pakistani military operation in Swat nor the US drone attacks have produced any improvement in the stability or security of Afghanistan, while Pakistan is now mired in one of the most substantial humanitarian crises of its history.

Let us return, however, to earlier this year. Was Pakistan really in danger of falling into the hands of the Taliban—a danger averted only by the assault on Swat? Reading the reporting from the region (the Pakistani army is operating under a media blackout) and published testimonies from displaced citizens, the clear answer is no. The Taliban operating in the north and southwestern regions were and are still an amorphous, ill-defined lot, ideologically and politically diverse—from jihadists to secular subnationalists to tribalists. There was no logical path by which they would have been able to overwhelm a nation of nearly 180 million, a standing army of more than 600,000, vibrant mega-cities and an established civilian infrastructure.

Similarly, the history of Pakistan was given short shrift in the rush to declare it a faltering state about to become a radicalized, failed state. Even cursory analysis would show that the citizens of Pakistan, given the few opportunities, have kept conservative Islamic parties to less than 10 percent of the seats in any election. This even though Pakistan endured a decade of the Islamization policies of Gen. Zia ul-Haq, who did his best to radicalize and militarize his citizenry in an effort to wage jihad in Afghanistan and India. Yet Pakistan emerged from that dark era and embraced the largely secular policies of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif.

But perhaps the most egregious oversight was that the Obama administration ignored Pakistan's recent past. It has once again become a democratic nation. Since 2007 a vibrant and peaceful movement for the rule of law has fought the autocracy of Gen. Pervez Musharraf—the military man Washington supported. In the 2008 elections, Pakistanis rejected religious parties in all provinces and propelled the party of the assassinated Benazir Bhutto to power. This was the beating heart of democracy in the Muslim world. While America once stood next to the dictators of Pakistan, it now had a chance to stand next to the people of Pakistan—to support them in their fight against the horrifying terrorism on their soil, to support them in building up their judicial and civilian infrastructure and transforming a militarized economy into a twenty-first-century global economy.

Instead, we turned again to the military and demanded that it wage a domestically destabilizing war. We increased our reliance on drone attacks. We failed to include significant powers in the region—India, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia—in the discussions on Afghanistan. Predictably, the results undermined our aims. The civilian government has no viable domestic agenda to fight the many challenges it faces. It offers no solution, political or civil, to the grievances of the people in Swat, nor any plans to address that existing humanitarian crisis. It is increasingly seen as weak and under American influence.

The military, after declaring "success" in Swat, has now launched an offensive in Waziristan—Operation Rah-e Nijat (Path to Salvation)—to combat the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan. The operation comes after eleven days of terrorist attacks across Pakistan, including on the military headquarters, by the TTP. Once again, there are no indications of what will constitute success, how the state will cope with the civilian exodus from the region or, most important, what will happen when the TTP flee into the neighboring and highly volatile province of Baluchistan. Surely the military will have no choice but to declare Waziristan a "success" and move into Baluchistan, where a separatist movement has waged its own war since 2004.

We ignore histories and realities in our quest to fight "the war of necessity." Swat, Waziristan and Baluchistan are symptoms of a truncated civil society, enveloped in poverty and illiteracy and ripe for exploitation by religious extremists. We need more than military hardware to fight these symptoms. We need a strong, legitimate civilian government that is accountable to its people—all of its people.

Manan Ahmed, a historian of Pakistan, blogs at chapatimystery.com.

The Best Wall of Defense

MOSHARRAF ZAIDI

Poor old Uncle Sam can't seem to catch a break in Pakistan. A week after Congress approved the Kerry-Lugar bill, which grants a shiny new $1.5 billion a year for the next five years for Pakistan's economic development and security needs, opinion polls confirmed what had been reported by Western media outfits for weeks: that Pakistanis are increasingly distrustful and suspicious of America. Eighty percent do not want to cooperate with the United States in its "war on terror." Seventy-six percent don't want the United States to partner with their country in its pursuit of extremists through drone strikes.

There is much disquiet about these poll numbers among American diplomats assigned to manage the US-Pakistan relationship, particularly given the low opinion of America among Pakistan's emerging urban middle class. The concerns are well-founded. It is one of the great prizes in the Muslim world. There's fat chance of winning hearts and minds anywhere else if the United States can't do well in Pakistan's cities.

Even more perplexing for US policy-makers is that anti-Americanism in Pakistan is growing just as Pakistanis are becoming increasingly assertive in their rejection of extremism. The same Pakistanis who are so deeply averse to America's growing role in their country's affairs reject the presence of Al Qaeda and the Taliban in their country even more emphatically (86 percent) and support their military's recent offensive against the extremists in Swat overwhelmingly (69 percent). Support for peace deals with terrorist groups—something that has long been an Achilles' heel of US policy in Pakistan—has nose-dived from 72 percent to 50 percent. Pakistanis are fed up with extremism.

The roots of America's image problem are not hard to find. Every time a Pakistani government bends over backward to please Washington, it suffers domestically. Why they bend over so readily is no secret: elite Pakistan (military, feudal and capitalist) loves a good sugar daddy, and Uncle Sam is among the best.

The Obama administration is right to formally commit support to democracy in Pakistan (as the Kerry-Lugar bill does, by promising aid only if it is managed by democratic civilian governments). However, it is wrong to think that being democrati-

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cally elected gives a government a free pass to do things that fly in the face of public opinion. Obama should know better, given that he is the beneficiary of eight years of suicidal Republican governance in his country.

Overt and undignified cooperation with America, even if it is in pursuit of a common enemy, won't fly in Pakistan, because it is more of the same client-patron relationship that has always defined US-Pakistan relations. The Pakistani people suspect that the only beneficiaries of American largesse will be the ruling elite. Since unfettered corruption has long been a staple of government in their country, their calculus is probably right.

Part of the complexity in Pakistan is rooted in its scale, something too often understated in Western reporting or not stated at all. Pakistanis represent the Muslim world's largest and most widely dispersed diaspora. With nearly 180 million people, Pakistan is the seventh-largest country in the world. Roughly one in six Pakistanis lives in a middle-class household. They help generate the world's twenty-seventh-largest economy. The Kerry-Lugar bill's $1.5 billion would be benevolent if Pakistan were the size of Jordan (population 6 million) or Georgia (4.5 million). In Pakistan, $1.5 billion is less than 0.1 percent of GDP. Remittances from Pakistan's diaspora, at more than $7.5 billion a year, are five times what the Kerry-Lugar bill offers. And there are no embarrassing conditions placed on the checks those Pakistanis send home.

While Democrats in America, Karzai cabinet members in Afghanistan and Pakistan's entire spectrum of opinion are alarmed by Gen. Stanley McChrystal's request for more troops in Afghanistan, the Pakistani elite stands its ground. Pakistani military and civilian leaders want more US troops in Afghanistan for the same reason the American war machine does—sustained rents and profits. There are 1.5 billion good reasons in it for them. The longer the United States remains mired in the Afghan quicksand, the longer the Pakistani elite will be able to extract US aid by perpetuating fears that the world's most unstable nuclear power is on the verge of "going rogue." Like Sarah Palin, Pakistan's elite is full of hot air.

The most dependable guarantor of Pakistani stability is Pakistan's emerging middle class, which has the most to lose in a civil conflict. This was the year Pakistan's middle class came of age, conquering some of the country's longest-festering demons. In March it forced the military to accept an independent judiciary, and in May it helped pressure the military to take on terrorists in Swat. The fight against terror in Pakistan has been expensive, with 7,000 civilians and 2,600 security personnel killed by terrorists since 2003.

The notion that Pakistan can be stabilized by a sustained US troop buildup in Afghanistan is nonsensical. A military surge there would only buttress a fear-based, profit-motivated narrative of Pakistan that is cultivated by corrupt Pakistani elites. It is the Pakistani middle class that is the best wall of defense against instability—not US soldiers in Afghanistan.

Mosharraf Zaidi has advised governments, nonprofits and international organizations such as the UN and EU on how to deliver aid in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He writes regular columns for the News *(Pakistan) and* Al-Shorouk *(Egypt), all of which can be found at mosharrafzaidi.com.*

How to Get Out

ROBERT DREYFUSS

There is no likelihood that the current US war in Afghanistan can achieve its aims (a narrower goal, the elimination of Al Qaeda, has for the most part already been accomplished). The corrupt government of President Karzai and his cronies is no longer sustainable, whether or not there is a second round in the fraud-marred election. A new government in Kabul must emerge, in the process accommodating Pashtun nationalists, the Taliban and other insurgents. Those latter groups, along with tribal and ethnic leaders, various warlords and representatives of Afghanistan's myriad political factions, will need international support to underwrite a new national compact. That national accord will probably not be a strong central government but rather a decentralized federal system in which provinces and districts retain a significant degree of autonomy. To secure international support, the United States must defer to the United Nations to convene a conference in which Afghans themselves hammer out the new way forward. The world community must pledge its support of Afghanistan financially for years to come. And this must occur against the backdrop of an unconditional withdrawal of US and NATO forces.

Accordingly, the first step for Washington must be to abandon the idea of a decades-long counterinsurgency, fire its advocates—including Gen. Stanley McChrystal and Gen. David Petraeus, architect of the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*—and admit that the multiheaded insurgency in southern and eastern Afghanistan can't be defeated by military means. At the same time, the Obama administration will have to give up its massive nation-building project, dismantling the empire of US departments, agencies, provincial reconstruction teams and the rest now overseen by Richard Holbrooke, the US special envoy. Instead, the United States should prepare to channel a substantial flow of international development assistance and humanitarian aid to Afghanistan through a newly reconstructed, rebalanced Afghan government.

In addition, President Obama should declare that the United States has achieved its principal objective in Afghanistan, namely, the near-total destruction of Al Qaeda as an organization. With the agreement of the Afghan government, a limited US intelligence and counterterrorism mission designed to monitor the remnants of Al Qaeda can remain in Afghanistan. And Al Qaeda's operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan can be dealt with by intelligence, law enforcement and US Special Forces personnel in cooperation with security agencies in those countries.

The president must also announce an unconditional timetable for the withdrawal of US and NATO forces, on the model of the US drawdown in Iraq, over, say, a period of two years or so. The goal should be a Status of Forces Agreement with a new Afghan government, pertaining to the role of US forces in training an Afghan national army far smaller than the bulky 400,000-man security force envisioned by General McChrystal.

Then comes the tricky part: the president should encourage the convening of an international Bonn II conference involving the UN, the major world powers and Afghanistan's neighbors—including Iran, India and Pakistan—to support the renegotiation

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We Call for the United States to End

A Statement from the **Campaign for Peace and Democracy** October 2009

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This may be a turning point for the expanding U.S./NATO wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a time when speaking out clearly and unambiguously against war can make a crucial difference. Today we see signs all too reminiscent of the step-by-step deepening of the U.S. commitment to the war in Vietnam in the 1960s. In response, we declare ourselves firmly against military escalation in the region and for the withdrawal of all U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan and Pakistan now. We also call for an end to drone attacks in both countries.

There are currently 108,000 U.S./ NATO troops in Afghanistan. President Obama has authorized increasing U.S. forces by 21,000, which will mean more than 68,000 U.S. troops by the end of 2009. In view of the war's growing unpopularity, Obama may very well abandon troop escalation. Reportedly, some in the Administration even recommended reducing U.S. forces and focusing more on strikes against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But even a scaled-back military presence constitutes an illegitimate occupation, one that wreaks havoc on the lives of innocent civilians and can only strengthen the Taliban and terrorist networks such as Al Qaeda.

Americans are increasingly disillusioned with the war. According to an August CNN poll, 57 percent oppose the Afghan war, a 9 percent increase since May, and there is growing unease in Congress. The cynical spectacle of Afghanistan's fraudulent presidential election has further eroded what little domestic and international credibility the corrupt Karzai regime retained.

In both Afghanistan and Pakistan the actions of the United States and its allies serve to strengthen fundamentalist forces. Fearing unpopular NATO troop casualties, the U.S. relies heavily on air power, which inevitably results in the death of innocent civilians. Far from eliminating terrorist networks, these air strikes only deepen popular hostility to the U.S./NATO war effort, pushing growing numbers of Afghans and Pakistanis toward the Taliban. Already fully a quarter of the Afghan population thinks that attacks on U.S./NATO forces are justified.

In Pakistan, the war is now being fought with the open and heavy involvement of U.S. Predator and other drones. Because of the frequent killing of civilians by the drones, on top of the resentment caused by Washington's long support of the dictator Musharraf, Pakistani public opinion now rates the U.S. as the number one threat — ahead even of India, Pakistan's long time enemy.

U.S. actions in Afghanistan and Pakistan take place in the context of a global military system much more massive and far-flung than most Americans realize. Officially, over 190,000 troops and 115,000 civilian employees are stationed in approximately 900 military facilities in 46 countries and territories — and the actual numbers are far greater. U.S. military spending of more than $600 billion a year, in the words of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, "adds up to about what the entire rest of the world combined spends on defense."

The invasion and occupation of Afghanistan have been part of a comprehensive effort to assert U.S. strategic power and credibility, in the Central and South Asian region and globally — the power to control energy supplies, to overawe rivals, to intervene wherever Washington deems necessary, and to engage other countries in U.S. power projection. Since 2001, the United States has established 19 new bases in Afghanistan and neighboring countries, inserting a military presence into an area that Russia and China also seek to influence.

Afghanistan was a devastated nation even before 2001, due to the destruction wrought by the Soviet occupation and the subsequent civil war. Since then the Afghan people have endured eight more years of war and misery. Many Afghans felt a sense of liberation when the Taliban was driven from power, but it soon became clear that one set of oppressors had been replaced by another: by the warlords and drug traffickers of the former Northern Alliance and the U.S. /NATO occupiers.

The Taliban's misogyny was vicious and extreme, but the situation of women remains horrific. Although a large number of Afghan girls did go to primary school after 2001 and a handful of women did get elected to the parliament, the vast majority of women are still confined to their homes, unable to

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Its Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan!

work, too fearful to attend school and forced into marriages, often as children. Many women who would prefer not to wear their burqas are afraid to be seen without them.

According to Afghan feminist leader Malalai Joya, "Victims of abuse and rape find no justice because the judiciary is dominated by fundamentalists. A growing number of women, seeing no way out of the suffering in their lives, have taken to suicide by self-immolation." President Karzai signed a disgraceful law earlier this year, applying to Shia women, that gives a husband the right to withdraw basic maintenance from his wife, including food, if she refuses to obey his sexual demands. It grants guardianship of children exclusively to their fathers and grandfathers, requires women to get permission from their husbands to work, and effectively allows a rapist to avoid prosecution by paying "blood money" to his victim.

Most Afghans lack access to safe drinking water and medical care. The country remains one of the world's poorest. The U.S. has done virtually nothing to alleviate this terrible poverty; instead, it has added to the suffering of the Afghan people, women as well as men, the constant threat of military violence. The Taliban gains strength in response to the grossly inadequate amount of foreign aid, as well as to the brutalities of the U.S./NATO war.

The Pakistani military and intelligence have long played a double game, taking military aid from Washington while simultaneously fighting and backing the Taliban. While the majority of Pakistanis oppose the Taliban today, underlying conditions enable it to grow stronger. Many of the country's poor live in near-feudal conditions. In the Swat Valley the Taliban was able to exploit the grievances of landless rural tenants for its own reactionary purposes. Unwilling and unable to address the social and economic realities that create support for or at least acquiescence to the Taliban among many in the population, the Pakistani military and elite may well make further concessions to the fundamentalists.

If the people of Afghanistan and Pakistan have any chance of defeating fundamentalism, fighting misogyny and winning genuine democracy, the U.S. can help mainly by calling off the inhumane and un-winnable "war on terror," by whatever name, and replacing it with a radically different policy of massive foreign aid and an end to support for elites and governments that perpetuate gross inequalities. Democratic forces may be weak, but they will never grow stronger while the U.S. occupies Afghanistan, sends missiles into Pakistan and bolsters corrupt governments in both countries.

Withdrawal should not mean that the U.S. abandons any effort to help the people of Afghanistan and neighboring states. Washington ought to lend political support to regional negotiations and to a broader settlement of the disputes between India and Pakistan, which continue to stoke the violence in Afghanistan. Above all, the U.S. should provide large-scale humanitarian aid to the desperately poor Afghan population — which, aid agencies note, is hindered by being intermingled with military operations.

Afghanistan is badly fragmented along ethnic lines. If there is any progressive solution to these divisions it probably lies in regional negotiations among Afghanistan's neighbors. We cannot foresee what form this solution might take, but we know it must not include any political dictation by Washington or the continuation of U.S. troops or military operations in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Ending U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan and Pakistan now is not only right in itself; it is also indispensable as a way to begin countering the bitterness and hostility in Muslim countries that breeds terrorist threats to our own security, threats that arise from networks that are not limited to any specific geographic location. In addition to ending military intervention in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the United States should withdraw its forces from Iraq, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. It must end all support to Arab autocracies and police states and give real support to Palestinian statehood. A truly democratic U.S. foreign policy is desperately needed to address the misery and inequity in Afghanistan, Pakistan and many other countries, but we can only begin to do so by diverting our country's vast wealth away from militarism and the drive for "full spectrum dominance" of the world. We, the undersigned, are dedicated to working for this new foreign policy.

NOTE: For references and a full list of signers, go to www.cpdweb.org

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of the Afghanistan compact. At the table must be representatives of all of Afghanistan's stakeholders, including the Taliban and their allies. In advance of that, the United States should join other nations and the UN to persuade President Karzai, his main electoral opponents and other Afghan politicians to form a coalition that would create an interim caretaker regime until the establishment of a more broadly based government.

At the same time, the United States must launch a diplomatic surge aimed at persuading, cajoling and bribing Afghanistan's neighbors to support the effort, including Taliban supporters, such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and opponents, including Iran, India and Russia. Obama must recognize that Pakistan is a key part of the problem, not the solution: the Afghan Taliban are not a formless, leaderless group. They are an arm of Pakistan's army and its intelligence service, the ISI, and they have an address: Rawalpindi, the garrison city that is the headquarters for the Pakistani military. The message of the world community to the Pakistani military must be clear: Pakistan's legitimate interests in Afghanistan will be recognized, but Pakistani support of terrorist groups, whether aimed at Afghanistan or Kashmir, is simply not acceptable.

As a central part of the diplomatic effort, Obama must strongly encourage Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to bring key elements of the three interlinked insurgency movements—the Taliban, the Hezb-i-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Haqqani network—to the bargaining table. Elements of those groups that opt not to participate are unlikely to present more than a nuisance challenge to the government in Kabul, if cut off from Pakistani support. China, Pakistan's ally, which has a vital interest in Central Asia, should be willing to use its influence in Pakistan to make sure Islamabad and Rawalpindi are on board.

Similarly, Obama will have to work to get Iran, India and Russia to help persuade the remnants of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance (mostly Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras) to make room in Kabul for an enlarged Pashtun role, including the Taliban, in what could become a stable power-sharing arrangement. The ongoing US-Iran talks can be a useful forum to reach agreement between Washington and Tehran on common interests in stabilizing Afghanistan.

Last, the United States must take the lead in creating a global Marshall Plan to help Afghanistan rebuild its war-shattered economy, build a passable infrastructure and establish the rudiments of a national government. The United States must be realistic about what it can accomplish—and what it cannot. It cannot remake Afghan society, change its cultural mores, modernize its religious outlook, educate its women or reshape the tribal system that prevails in its rural villages. It can break Al Qaeda and, as it exits, leave behind at least the possibility that Afghans will begin to create a sustainable society. But it must recognize, above all, that what it leaves behind won't be pretty. ■

Robert Dreyfuss is a Nation *contributing editor.*

Remember the Women?

Women belong at the center of the debate over the Afghan war, not on the margins.

by ANN JONES

Women are made for homes or graves.
—Afghan saying

ROB SUSSMAN

Gen. Stanley McChrystal says he needs more American troops to salvage something like winning in Afghanistan and restore the country to "normal life." Influential senators want to increase spending to train more soldiers for the Afghan National Army and Police. The Feminist Majority recently backed off a call for more troops, but it continues to warn against US withdrawal as an abandonment of Afghan women and girls. Nearly everyone assumes troops bring greater security; and whether your touchstone is military victory, national interest or the welfare of women and girls, "security" seems a good thing.

I confess that I agonize over competing proposals now commanding President Obama's attention because I've spent years in Afghanistan working with women, and I'm on their side. When the Feminist Majority argues that withdrawing American forces from Afghanistan will return the Taliban to power and women to house arrest, I see in my mind's eye the faces of women I know and care about. Yet an unsentimental look at the record reveals that for all the fine talk of women's rights since the US invasion, equal rights for Afghan women have been illusory all along, a polite feel-good fiction that helped to sell the American enterprise at home and cloak in respectability the misbegotten government we installed in Kabul. That it is a fiction is borne out by recent developments in Afghanistan—President Karzai's approving a new family law worthy of the Taliban, and American acquiescence in Karzai's new law and, initially, his theft of the presidential election—and by the systematic intimidation, murder or exile of one Afghan woman after another who behaves as if her rights were real and worth fighting for.

Ann Jones, author of Kabul in Winter, *does humanitarian work in post-conflict zones with NGOs and the United Nations.*

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Last summer in Kabul, where "security" already suffocates anything remotely suggesting normal life, I asked an Afghan colleague at an international NGO if she was ever afraid. I had learned of threatening phone calls and night letters posted on the gates of the compound, targeting Afghan women who work within. Three of our colleagues in another city had been kidnapped by the militia of a warlord, formerly a member of the Karzai government, and at the time, as we learned after their release, were being beaten, tortured and threatened with death if they continued to work.

"Fear?" my colleague said. "Yes. We live with fear. In our work here with women we are always under threat. Personally, I work every day in fear, hoping to return safely at the end of the day to my home. To my child and my husband."

"And the future?" I said. "What do you worry about?"

"I think about the upcoming election," she said. "I fear that nothing will change. I fear that everything will stay the same."

Then Karzai gazetted the Shiite Personal Status Law, and it was suddenly clear that even as we were hoping for the best, everything had actually grown much worse for women.

Why is this important? At this critical moment, as Obama tries to weigh options against our national security interests, his advisers can't be bothered with—as one US military officer put it to me—"the trivial fate of women." As for some hypothetical moral duty to protect the women of Afghanistan—that's off the table. Yet it is precisely that dismissive attitude, shared by Afghan and many American men alike, that may have put America's whole Afghan enterprise wrong in the first place. Early on, Kofi Annan, then United Nations secretary general, noted that the condition of Afghan women was "an affront to all standards of dignity, equality and humanity."

Annan took the position, set forth in 2000 in the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 1325, that real conflict resolution, reconstruction and lasting peace cannot be achieved without the full participation of women every step of the way. Karzai gave lip service to the idea, saying in 2002, "We are determined to work to improve the lot of women after all their suffering under the narrow-minded and oppressive rule of the Taliban." But he has done no such thing. And the die had already been cast: of the twenty-three Afghan notables invited to take part in the Bonn Conference in December 2001, only two were women. Among ministers appointed to the new Karzai government, there were only two; one, the minister for women's affairs, was warned not to do "too much."

The Bonn agreement expressed "appreciation to the Afghan mujahidin who…have defended the independence, territorial integrity and national unity of the country and have played a major role in the struggle against terrorism and oppression, and whose sacrifice has now made them both heroes of jihad and champions of peace, stability and reconstruction of their beloved homeland, Afghanistan." On the other hand, their American- and Saudi-sponsored "sacrifice" had also made many of them war criminals in the eyes of their countrymen. Most Afghans surveyed between 2002 and 2004 by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission thought the leaders of the mujahedeen were war criminals who should be brought to justice (75 percent) and removed from public office (90 percent). The mujahedeen, after all, were Islamist extremists just like the Taliban, though less disciplined than the Taliban, who had risen up to curb the violent excesses of the mujahedeen and then imposed excesses of their own. That's the part American officials seem unwilling to admit: that the mujahedeen warlords of the Karzai government and the oppressive Taliban are brothers under the skin. From the point of view of women today, America's friends and America's enemies in Afghanistan are the same kind of guys.

Though women were excluded from the Bonn process, they did seem to make strides in the first years after the fall of the Taliban. In 2004 a new constitution declared, "The citizens of Afghanistan—whether man or woman—have equal rights and duties before the law." Westerners greeted that language as a confirmation of gender equality, and to this day women's "equal rights" are routinely cited in Western media as evidence of great progress. Yet not surprisingly, Afghan officials often interpret the article differently. To them, having "equal rights and duties" is nothing like being equal. The first chief justice of the Afghan Supreme Court, formerly a mullah in a Pakistani madrassa, once explained to me that men have a right to work while women have a right to obey their husbands. The judiciary—an ultraconservative, inadequate, incompetent and notoriously corrupt branch of government—interprets the constitution by its own lights. And the great majority of women across the country, knowing little or nothing of rights, live now much as they did under the Taliban—except back then there were no bombs.

In any case, the constitution provides that no law may contravene the principles of Sharia law. In effect, mullahs and judges have always retained the power to decide at any moment what "rights" women may enjoy, or not; and being poorly educated, they're likely to factor into the judgment their own idiosyncratic notions of Sharia, plus tribal customary laws and the size of proffered bribes. Thus, although some women still bravely exercise liberty and work with some success to improve women's condition, it should have been clear from the get-go that Afghan women possess no inalienable rights at all. Western legal experts who train Afghan judges and lawyers in "the law" as we conceive it often express frustration that Afghans just don't get it; Afghan judges think the same of them.

The paper foundations of Afghan women's rights go beyond national law to include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Treaty of Civil and Political Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). All these international agreements that delineate and establish human rights around the world were quickly ratified by the Karzai government. CEDAW, however, requires ratifying governments to submit periodic reports on their progress in eliminating discrimination; Afghanistan's first report, due in 2004, hasn't appeared yet. That's one more clue to the Karzai government's real attitude toward women—like Karzai's sequestration of his own wife, a doctor with much-needed skills who is kept locked up at home.

Given this background, there should have been no surprise when President Karzai first signed off in March on the Shiite Personal Status Law or, as it became known in the Western

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press, the Marital Rape Law. The bill had been percolating in the ultraconservative Ministry of Justice ever since the Iranian-backed Ayatollah Asif Mohseni submitted it in 2007. Then last February Karzai apparently saw the chance to swap passage of the SPSL for the votes of the Shiites—that is, the Hazara minority, 15–20 percent of the population. It was just one of many deals Karzai consolidated as he kept to the palace while rival presidential candidates stomped the countryside. The SPSL passed without alteration through the Parliamentary Judicial Committee, another little bunch of ultraconservative men. When it reached the floor of Parliament, it was too late to object. Some women members succeeded in getting the marriageable age for girls—age 9—revised to 16. Calling it victory, they settled for that. The Supreme Court reviewed the bill and pronounced it constitutionally correct on grounds the justices did not disclose.

The rights Afghan women stood to lose on paper and in real life were set forth in the SPSL. Parliamentarian Shinkai Karokhail alerted a reporter at the *Guardian*, and the law was denounced around the world for legalizing marital rape by authorizing a husband to withhold food from a wife who fails to provide sexual service at least once every four days. (The interval assumes the husband has four wives, a practice permitted by Islam and legalized by this legislation.) But that's not all the law does. It also denies or severely limits women's rights to inherit, divorce or have guardianship of their own children. It forbids women to marry without permission and legalizes forced marriage. It legalizes marriage to and rape of minors. It gives men control of all their female relatives. It denies women the right to leave home except for "legitimate purposes"—in effect giving men the power to deny women access to work, education, healthcare, voting and whatever they please. It generally treats women as property, and it considers rape of women or minors outside marriage as a property crime, requiring restitution to be made to the owner, usually the father or husband, rather than a crime against the victim. All these provisions are contained in twenty-six articles of the original bill that have been rendered into English and analyzed by Western legal experts. No doubt other regressive rules will be discovered if the 223 additional articles of the law ever appear in English.

In April a few women parliamentarians spoke out against the law. A group of women, estimated to number about 300, staged a peaceful protest in the street, protected by Kabul's police officers from an angry mob of hundreds of men who pelted them with obscenities and stones, shouting, "Death to the enemies of Islam!" Under pressure from international diplomats—President Obama called the law "abhorrent"—Karzai withdrew it for review. The international press reported the women's victory. In June, when a large group of women MPs and activists met with Karzai, he assured them the bill had been amended and would be submitted to Parliament again after the elections.

Instead, on July 27, without public announcement, Karzai entered the SPSL, slightly revised but with principal provisions intact, into the official gazette, thereby making it law. Apparently he was betting that with the presidential election only three weeks away, the United States and its allies would not complain again. After all, they had about $500 million (at least half of that American money) riding on a "credible" outcome; and they couldn't afford the cost of a runoff or the political limbo of an interregnum. In August, Brad Adams, Asia director of Human Rights Watch, observed that such "barbaric laws were supposed to have been relegated to the past with the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, yet Karzai has revived them and given them his official stamp of approval." No American official said a word.

But what about all the women parliamentarians so often cited as evidence of the progress of Afghan women? With 17 percent of the upper house and 27 percent of the lower—eighty-five women in all—you'd think they could have blocked the SPSL. But that didn't happen, for many reasons. Many women parliamentarians are mere extensions of the warlords who financed their campaigns and tell them how to vote: always in opposition to women's rights. Most non-Shiite women took little interest in the bill, believing that it applied only to the Shiite minority. Although Hazara women have long been the freest in the country and the most active in public life, some of them argued that it is better to have a bad law than none at all because, as one Hazara MP told me, "without a written law, men can do whatever they want."

Women's worsening position is a result of the violence the war engenders on two fronts: the public stage and the home.

The human rights division of the UN's Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) published a report in early July, before the SPSL became law, documenting the worsening position of Afghan women, the rising violence against them and the silence of international and Afghan officials who could defend them. The researchers' most surprising finding is this: considering the risks of life outside the home and the support women receive within it, "there is no clear distinction between rural and urban women." Commentators on Afghanistan, myself included, have assumed—somewhat snobbishly, it now appears—that while illiterate women in the countryside might be treated no better than animals, educated urban Afghan women blaze a higher trail. The debacle of the Shiite Personal Status Law explodes that myth.

The UNAMA report attributes women's worsening position in Afghan society to the violence the war engenders on two domestic fronts: the public stage and the home. The report is dedicated to the memory of Sitara Achakzai, a member of the Kandahar Provincial Council and outspoken advocate of women's rights, who was shot to death on April 12, soon after being interviewed by the UNAMA researchers. She "knew her life was in danger," they report. "But like many other Afghan women such as Malalai Kakar, the highest-ranking female police officer in Kandahar killed in September 2008, Sitara Achakzai had consciously decided to keep fight-

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ing to end the abuse of Afghan women." Malalai Kakar, 40, mother of six, had headed a team of ten policewomen handling cases of domestic violence.

In 2005 Kim Sengupta, a reporter with the London *Independent*, interviewed five Afghan women activists; by October 2008 three of them had been murdered. A fourth, Zarghuna Kakar (no relation to Malalai), a member of the Kandahar Provincial Council, had left the country after she and her family were attacked and her husband was killed. She said she had pleaded with Ahmed Wali Karzai, head of the Kandahar Provincial Council, for protection; but he told her she "should have thought about what may happen" before she stood for election. Kakar told the reporter, "It was his brother [President Karzai], the Americans, and the British who told us that we women should get involved in political life. Of course, now I wish I hadn't."

Women learn to pull their punches. MPs in Kabul confessed that they are afraid of the fundamentalist warlords who control the Parliament; so they censor themselves and keep silent. One said, "Most of the time women don't dare even say a word about sensitive Islamic issues, because they are afraid of being labeled as blasphemous." Many women MPs have publicly declared their intention to quit at the end of the term. Women journalists also told UNAMA that they "refrain from criticizing warlords and other power brokers, or covering topics that are deemed contentious such as women's rights."

Other women targeted for attack are civil servants, employees of international and national organizations, including the UN, healthcare workers and women in "immoral" professions—which include acting, singing, appearing on television and journalism. When popular Tolo TV presenter Shaima Rezayee, 24, was forced out of her job in 2005, she said "things are not getting better.… We have made some gains, but there are a lot of people who want to take it all back. They are not even Taliban, they are here in Kabul." Soon after, she was shot and killed. Zakia Zaki, 35, a teacher and radio journalist who produced programs on women's rights, was shot to death in her home in Parwan Province on June 6, 2007. Actress Parwin Mushtakhel fled the country last spring after her husband was gunned down outside their house, punished for his failure to keep her confined. When the Taliban fell, she thought things were getting better, but "the atmosphere has changed; day by day women can work less and less." Setara Hussainzada, the singer from Herat who appeared on the Afghan version of *American Idol* (and in the documentary *Afghan Star*) also fled for her life.

Threats against women in public life are intended to make them go home—to "unliberate" themselves through voluntary house arrest. But if public life is dangerous, so is life at home. Most Afghan women—87 percent, according to Unifem—are beaten on a regular basis. The UNAMA researchers looked into the unmentionable subject of rape and found it to be "an everyday occurrence in all parts of the country" and "a human rights problem of profound proportions." Outside marriage, the rapists are often members or friends of the family. Young girls forced to marry old men are raped by the old man's brothers and sons. Women and children—young boys are also targets—are raped by people who have charge of them: police, prison guards, soldiers, orphanage or hospital staff members. The female victims of rape are mostly between the ages of 7 and 30; many are between 10 and 20, but some are as young as 3; and most women are dead by 42.

Women rarely tell anyone because the blame and shame of rape falls on them. Customary law permits an accused rapist to make restitution to the victim's father, but because the question of consent does not figure in the law of sexual relations, the victim is guilty of *zina*, or adultery, and can be punished accordingly: sent to jail or murdered by family members to preserve family honor. The great majority of women and girls in prison at any time are charged with *zina*; most have been raped and/or have run away from home to escape violence. It's probably safe to say, in the absence of statistics, that police—who, incidentally, are trained by the American for-profit contractor DynCorp—spend more time tracking down runaway women and girls than real criminals. Rapists, on the other hand, as UNAMA investigators found, are often "directly linked to power brokers who are, effectively, above the law and enjoy immunity from arrest as well as immunity from social condemnation." Last year Karzai pardoned political thugs who had gang-raped a woman before witnesses, using a bayonet, and who had somehow been convicted despite their good connections. UNAMA researchers conclude: "The current reality is that…women are denied their most fundamental human rights and risk further violence in the course of seeking justice for crimes perpetrated against them." For women, "human rights are values, standards, and entitlements that exist only in theory and at times, not even on paper."

Wherever troops advance, women are caught in the cross-fire, killed, wounded, forced to flee or locked up just as they were under the Taliban.

Caught in the maelstrom of personal, political and military violence, Afghan women worry less about rights than security. But they complain that the men who plan the country's future define "security" in ways that have nothing to do with them. The conventional wisdom, which I have voiced myself, holds that without security, development cannot take place. Hence, our troops must be fielded in greater numbers, and Afghan troops trained faster, and private for-profit military contractors hired at fabulous expense, all to bring security. But the rule doesn't hold in Afghanistan precisely because of that equation of "security" with the presence of armed men. Wherever troops advance in Afghanistan, women are caught in the cross-fire, killed, wounded, forced to flee or locked up once again, just as they were in the time of the Taliban. Suggesting an alternative to the "major misery" of warfare, Sweden's former Defense Minister Thage Peterson calls for Swedish soldiers to leave the "military adventure" in Afghanistan while civilians stay to help rebuild the country. But Sweden's soldiers

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are few, and its aid organizations among the best in the world. For the United States even to lean toward such a plan would mean reasserting civilian control of the military and restoring the American aid program (USAID), hijacked by private for-profit contractors: two goals worth fighting for.

Today, most American so-called development aid is delivered not by USAID, but by the military itself through a system of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), another faulty idea of former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. Soldiers, unqualified as aid workers and already busy soldiering, now shmooze with village "elders" (often the wrong ones) and bring "development," usually a costly road convenient to the PRT base, impossible for Afghans to maintain and inaccessible to women locked up at home. Recent research conducted by respected Afghanistan hands found that this aid actually fuels "massive corruption"; it fails to win hearts and minds not because we spend too little but because we spend too much, too fast, without a clue. Meanwhile, the Taliban bring the things Afghans say they need—better security, better governance and quick, hard-edged justice. US government investigators are looking into allegations that aid funds appropriated for women's projects have been diverted to PRTs for this more important work of winning hearts and minds with tarmac. But the greatest problem with routing aid through the military is this: what passes for development is delivered from men to men, affirming in the strongest possible terms the misogynist conviction that women do not matter. You'll recognize it as the same belief that, in the Obama administration's strategic reappraisal of Afghanistan, pushed women off the table.

So there's no point talking about how women and girls might be affected by the strategic military options remaining on Obama's plate. None of them bode well for women. To send more troops is to send more violence. To withdraw is to invite the Taliban. To stay the same is not possible, now that Karzai has stolen the election in plain sight and made a mockery of American pretensions to an interest in anything but our own skin and our own pocketbook. But while men plan the onslaught of more men, it's worth remembering what "normal life" once looked like in Afghanistan, well before the soldiers came. In the 1960s and '70s, before the Soviet invasion—when half the country's doctors, more than half the civil servants and three-quarters of the teachers were women—a peaceful Afghanistan advanced slowly into the modern world through the efforts of all its people. What changed all that was not only the violence of war but the accession to power of the most backward men in the country: first the Taliban, now the mullahs and mujahedeen of the fraudulent, corrupt, Western-designed government that stands in opposition to "normal life" as it is lived in the developed world and was once lived in their own country. What happens to women is not merely a "women's issue"; it is the central issue of stability, development and durable peace. No nation can advance without women, and no enterprise that takes women off the table can come to much good. ■

Letters

(continued from page 2)

differ in one respect, that is in my interpretation of the meaning of Tworkov's lifelong experience for younger artists not so much as the cautionary tale Schwabsky suggested, of how depressing it is to be an artist—although certainly that comes up!—but also the other message Tworkov states as often and so eloquently, that art saves his life, that everything is redeemed in the studio. I was energized in my work on this book by the idea that young artists would see a model for how to be an artist over a lifetime, somehow always, even in old age and near death, finding a renewed path of excitement in the studio, not only art world or fame related.

MIRA SCHOR, editor, *The Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworkov*

Schwabsky Replies

LONDON

It's nice to be praised by a writer as distinguished as John Spike, author of a fine book on onetime *Nation* art critic Fairfield Porter. But he's not quite accurate in saying that my review of Jack Tworkov's writings never mentions his paintings—though it's conceivable that, like Eugène Fromentin or Robert Henri, Tworkov's writings will have a richer afterlife than his art. In saying that insinuations that Tworkov was too heavily influenced by de Kooning "were not always wrong" I gave a pretty strong hint that I'd agree with Spike that Tworkov's contribution to Abstract Expressionism, though solid, was not essential. On the other hand, I think I made it pretty clear in my last paragraph that Tworkov's persistence paid off, and that the geometrically structured paintings of his later years were his strongest work. They certainly can't be accused of looking like anyone else's.

That last paragraph also makes possible my response to Mira Schor. My "cautionary tale" should be taken in its structural context—it's a starting point but, while the shadows never quite go away, it's not where the piece ends. Still, I do think it would be a good point for young artists to meditate on, were they really capable of doing so. What if the incredible optimism with which they embark on their careers is misplaced? Perhaps Tworkov really did "save his life" in the studio, but it's misleading to imply that every artist can achieve the redemption Schor speaks of. At least, I'm not quite religious enough to believe it.

BARRY SCHWABSKY

Haphazard Pursuits

MIAMI BEACH, FLA.

It drives me crazy when people expound on the Declaration's "pursuit of Happiness," as Walter Mosley does in "Get Happy" [Oct. 5], without recognizing how the meaning of "happiness" has changed over the centuries. It has the same root as "happen," "perhaps" and "haphazard" and refers to luck or chance. The pursuit of happiness might be defined as seeking one's fortune—except "fortune" has also mutated. The Declaration refers to the right to create our own lives and strive for success, whatever that means to us. It does not guarantee freedom from sadness.

CAROLYN KLEPSER

Correction

Katha Pollitt's column last week should have said that the German Green Party was for the war in *Afghanistan*, not Iraq.

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Books & the Arts.

© THOMAS DEMAND, VG BILD-KUNST, BONN 2009/COURTESY NEUE NATIONALGALERIE

The Thomas Demand exhibition at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, on view September 18–January 17

A Makeshift World

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

Just as the act of using a computer comes with an implicit advisement—RTM (read the manual) or, less politely, RTFM—so any serious engagement with contemporary art comes with a like directive: RTC (read the catalog).

For many, I know, that practice is more honored in the breach than the observance. Rumor to the contrary, art catalogs are in general clearer and better written than computer manuals, even if they are probably a lot less cogent than they should be. Boris Groys has argued that the fact that no one reads most art commentary, as he calls it, should be taken as one of its great attractions for the writer: "For this very reason one can, in principle, write whatever one wants." I hope it's not quite true that no one reads it, for today one can't simply be a viewer, as we habitually call the addressee of contemporary art. To see a work without a sense of the commentary around it—its linguistic framing—means blinding oneself to where its edges are, to where the work leaves off and reality begins—to the work's position in the world.

All of which amounts to a circuitous admission that my first view of Thomas Demand's exhibition at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin (on view through January 17) was constrained by my neglect of an important part of its verbal framing—and this despite the fact that there have been few exhibitions of photographs in which writing is so prominently featured, though never in the photographs themselves. And believe me, I did read the texts so prominently and atypically displayed in the gallery—about which more later. They also constitute an important part of the catalog, so this was one instance in which I really did RTC right there in the gallery as I went along, and as one is meant to do. No, what I forgot to do (the purloined-letter syndrome at work, perhaps) was to RTT.

If I had bothered to read the title, I might have been saved the puzzlement I experienced when I wandered downstairs looking for the men's room and passed a bulletin board festooned with local press clippings about the exhibition. Stopping for a quick look, I was bemused by the slant the German papers had given their coverage: it seemed they all saw the show as the artist's meditation on his and their homeland. "*Demands Deutschstunde*," read the headline in *Die Welt*. Likewise *Die Zeit* headed its report "*Modell Deutschland*" and *Der Tagesspiegel*, "*Deutschland, deine Bühnenbilder*" ("*Bühnenbilder*" means stage scenery, but here it is a play on words: "*Bilder*" are pictures, images, and Demand's photographs are indeed staged images, albeit without actors). Other publications saved mentioning Germany for the subhead, where it could be conveyed in more than two or three words: "*Thomas Demand blickt auf Deutschland*" (*Berliner Morgenpost*); "*Die Neue Nationalgalerie Berlin präsentiert Thomas Demands Deutschlandbilder*" (*Berliner Zeitung*). Only as I scanned these articles with my weak German did I cotton on to the fact that Demand's exhibition had a title, cunningly disguised as its location: "Nationalgalerie." This was, I should have understood, Demand's exhibition about or, better yet, of his country.

Demand is sometimes mistaken for a member of the "Becher school," whose best-known members are Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth, a group of older German photographers who studied under Bernd and Hilla Becher at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. Demand, who was born in Munich in 1964, left Düsseldorf (where, studying sculpture, he did not work with the Bechers) in 1992, and in the years since he finished his MA at London's Goldsmiths' College in

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1994 he has become one of the world's leading photographers. The Neue Nationalgalerie exhibition follows big shows of his work in London (Serpentine Gallery, 2006) and New York City (Museum of Modern Art, 2005), among others. The monumentally scaled images of the Becher school are typically hyperbolically detailed—their macroscopic dimensions proffering a plethora of microscopic particulars, whether of faces, streetscapes, library interiors or factories. While it has often been noted that the massive size of Becher-school photographs gives them something like the impact of a painting—whereas traditional photographic prints were indeed prints, demanding the kind of intimate engagement suitable to an etching—large-scale Modernist painting, from Matisse to Barnett Newman to Alex Katz, had always favored the elimination of detail. The Becherians, by contrast, multiply details ad infinitum. And though none of them should be taken for mere technicians, the fact remains that in looking at their work one can never be unaware of the technical achievement involved in lending the camera a sort of superhuman eyesight. Their work is often referred to as cold and objective. No wonder, when it seems to lend the human eye the powers of a microscope, even when scanning a distant horizon.

Demand's photographs are nothing like that, despite their equally grand scale. And one would not call him a brilliant photographic technician, which is perhaps not surprising since he came to photography through sculpture. You don't look at his pictures to marvel at his subtle handling of light, incredible control of focus and mastery of tone. In fact, he seems deliberately to cultivate the sense that things are ever so slightly overlit, that just a little bit less of the scene is in perfect focus than might have been possible, that the image could have been rendered with greater crispness and definition. Not that he cultivates the look of the amateur snapshot: nothing seems accidental or haphazard here. But rather than availing himself of the camera's potential for an inhumanly penetrating apprehension of surfaces, he evokes what one might call a normal, technically competent but unfetishized mode of looking. The photographs pretend to be a little less carefully made than they really are.

While the manner of looking appears to be normal, the same cannot be said of what Demand gives us to look at. He shows ordinary things but not real ones. As is well-known by now, all of his photographs are taken in his studio; employing existing photographs, usually from the media but sometimes his own, as his sources, Demand uses paper, cardboard, cellophane and other flimsy, everyday materials to construct full-scale replicas of actually or formerly existing places. (At least they're said to be full-scale, although there are a few cases where this is obviously impossible: *Fabrik* [Factory], from 1994, for example.) These empty stage sets are what we see in the photographs. The reconstructions follow the general lineaments of their originals, but with most detail eliminated. In particular, every trace of language has completely vanished: the papers strewn across the work table and floor in *Büro* (Office), from 1995, have no text on them; the labels next to the doorbells that are the subject of *Hinterhaus* (2005) are variously colored but bear no names. (Even the work's title bears no translation; one dictionary explains that it refers to "part of a tenement house accessible only through a courtyard and thus considered inferior.") In general, since everything in the photographs has been newly built, nothing shows any signs of wear, any smudges or defects. Each thing has become a sort of abstraction of itself. In this, Demand shows more affinity with the tradition of grand-scale Modernist painting than with other recent German photography.

And yet a few important details are visible in Demand's images—details not of the things depicted but of how they've been reconstructed. This is the real reason the pictures must exist at this scale—if they were the size of classic photographs, it wouldn't be clear enough that they show a world made of paper. Demand has made a small number of more modestly scaled works, mostly still lifes, and they are among his best, but the things in them are shown at the same size they would be in any of his other photographs. Always, things appear as makeshift replicas. These images construct illusions only to deflate them. The image is empty, and eerily disinfected, and Demand makes sure you know it. You see the seams in every wall, the folding of the corners of the furniture. These are two-dimensional pictures of three-dimensional pictures based on other two-dimensional pictures of the real world. And how real is that, anyway? I suddenly feel like I've lost track.

An ambivalent relation to the reality that much photography earnestly aims to record is central to Demand's work. The titles, like the ones I've already mentioned, are clipped, tight-lipped; divulging minimal information, they underline the work's tendency to abstract itself from and generalize the source image, to present an almost Platonic idea of, say, a kitchen (*Klause 3* [Tavern 3], from 2006); an Olympic diving board (*Sprungturm* [Diving Board], 1994); an architectural office (*Zeichensaal* [Drafting Room], 1996); or whatever. Nevertheless—and here's where the injunction to RTC comes back to haunt us—Demand has always let it be known that his images represent particular places, and while some of these places may be of merely personal interest, others are historically fraught. Consider *Raum* (Room), from 1994: it depicts a white-walled, low-ceilinged place with blackened windows—but entirely wrecked, the Platonic idea of a shambles. For anyone familiar with the history of photography in recent art, it is impossible not to see *Raum* as something of an *hommage* (but perhaps also a retort) to one of the touchstone works of the new large-scale photography typified by the Becher school, Jeff Wall's *The Destroyed Room* (1978), the first of the Canadian artist's "cinematographic" (his term) lightbox transparencies.

But the textual penumbra around *Raum*—for instance, but not only, as represented by the catalog essay for this show, by the British art historian Mark Godfrey—makes one aware that this is not just any ruined room, and that in making the work Demand had other things on his mind along with his stance toward an important precursor. *Raum*, Godfrey discloses,

> is based on a picture of the bombed-out remains of Adolf Hitler's headquarters following the failed assassination attempt of July 1944. As much as the picture shows a key event in German history, so too it has been associated with the history of the cultural reception of Nazism in post-war Germany: it was published in many school books in the 1970s as it illustrated (with undue emphasis) that some resistance to Nazism had existed during the war.

Any visible sign that this place has anything to do with the war, with Germany, with Hitler, has been systematically removed. You won't find any telltale swastikas half hidden amid the debris, no matter how hard you look. Nothing indicates a temporal location in the 1940s. Walter Benjamin famously observed that Eugène Atget photographed Paris as if it were the scene of a crime; Demand meticulously scrubs away all evidential significance from the scenes he depicts. He utterly defeats the forensic gaze. But that doesn't necessarily mean that no crime has been committed or that it can't be solved; just that one can never know simply by looking, no matter how hard. Godfrey informs us that *Spüle*

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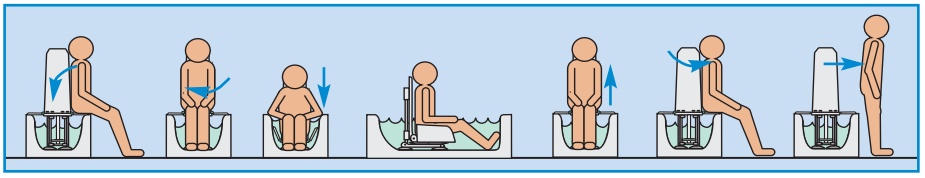

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(Sink), from 1997, is based on the basin full of unwashed dishes in a friend's house. Of course, they are the cleanest, shiniest unwashed dishes you've ever seen. This piece is one of the rare exceptions to the generally bland—uncannily, hauntingly bland—affect of Demand's work, maybe because of the acute high angle from which it was taken. Who stares down at a sink full of dishes like that? Myself, I try not to look at them too hard even while I'm washing them. Gawking into the sink's mirrored depths—that is, its mirrored surfaces—one might well be looking for the absent clue to a crime. Terrible things can happen in our friends' houses too.

© THOMAS DEMAND, VG BILD-KUNST, BONN 2009/NEUE NATIONALGALERIE

Raum (1994), by Thomas Demand

The ambivalence toward writing that characterizes Demand's photography—ostentatiously driven out of the image itself, language hovers portentously around it—is a product of the delicate balance he is trying to strike between the viewer's position of knowledge and ignorance of the source of his motifs. For the most part he succeeds. It's not really important that the viewer know in any particular case where the image comes from; but it is important that in the back of one's mind there lurks the possibility that the image might refer to something of historical significance. The secondary status of this knowledge is signaled by the fact that Godfrey's explanatory essay, instead of introducing the catalog as it usually would, is placed at the back of the book, after the images, and is numbered separately as well, and printed on different paper, like an insert. Of course, there's something artificial about putting the text in quarantine this way, but it makes the point.

That's not to say the catalog entirely downplays writing. Demand has added a sort of intermediate layer of text between his one- or two-word titles and the art historian's essay: each photograph is now accompanied by "captions" contributed by the prominent playwright and novelist Botho Strauss. The captions modulate fluently between narrative and essayistic registers without ever directly addressing the pictures they accompany; Hitler is mentioned in the caption for *Raum*, but since Strauss does not convey the backstory or mention the image's source, the unprepared (non-German) viewer will be none the wiser. As well as appearing in the catalog, which is designed so that the reader encounters the caption before the image, these texts are presented in the Neue Nationalgalerie on a nearly equal footing with the images, printed in oversized books laid open to the appropriate page in heavy wood-framed vitrines next to each photograph—all enveloped in a simultaneously understated and theatrical exhibition design by the British architectural firm Caruso St John. Some three miles' worth of gray curtain material has been used to shadow and subdue the Neue Nationalgalerie's classic Mies van der Rohe architecture while nesting the cool artifice of the photographs within a second layer of artifice. The museum itself could almost be the set for a Demand photograph.

On my second take of the exhibition, after sighting the telltale bulletin board, what struck me was how not-wrong I'd nevertheless been in failing to notice the Germanness of Demand's Germany the first time through. Eliminating all that detail from his imagery, and especially eliminating writing, effects a sort of displacement or dislocation; it takes things out of their places, transferring them to a purely mental realm.

Still, the tacit nature of this work's Germanness is striking. Imagine walking through an exhibition by Joseph Beuys devoted to the idea of the German nation without having to notice that this is the theme. Impossible. For Gerhard Richter, even more impossible. With Sigmar Polke, Hanne Darboven, Anselm Kiefer, Isa Genzken or Martin Kippenberger—for any of the photographers of the Becher school, too—a reflection on Germany and the traces of its history in the present could only be patent, unavoidable. Is this Demand's lesson: that Germany is now no different from anyplace else, that it is at last a normal, self-confident European nation like any other, unburdened of the memory of its historic tragedies, free of the guilt and resentment that have weighed so heavily on Demand's precursors? Has the effort of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past), a process as cumbersome as the word, been completed, or has it simply fizzled out?

It would be tempting to jump to such a conclusion, all the more so because of Strauss's role in the project. Strauss took a reactionary stance in the debates that raged on this subject around a decade ago, as the culture continued to contend with the repercussions from the *Historikerstreit* ("historians' quarrel") launched by Ernst Nolte in 1986. In a notorious article of 1993, Strauss expressed all too clearly his sympathy for xenophobia, decrying those—supposedly the left—who, he said, "are friendly to foreigners not for the sake of the foreign but because they greet, due to their wrath against what is ours, anything that destroys what is ours."

But what counts as destruction, and what counts as "ours," depends on your viewpoint. In 2002 the German Parliament voted to demolish the Palast der Republik, the grandiose seat of the former East German Parliament (which was, amazingly enough for those of us who are accustomed to official buildings being off-limits to the public except under the tightest security controls, a kind of municipal leisure center). It had been closed since 1990, and the idea was to replace it with a replica of the kaiser's castle that had once occupied the spot. The German Parliament sought to efface part of Berlin's living history in favor of sham historicism. Nothing that belonged to the GDR, according to powerful elements in Germany today, could possibly be "ours." In the meantime, a provisional building sits on the site, Temporäre Kunsthalle Berlin, with a two-year mission to showcase contemporary art—inside and out, for the building's facade as well as its interior is being given over to artists' use. Ah, Germany! Where else would it seem reasonable to use some of the country's most ideologically contested terrain as an artistic proving ground? At present, Bettina Pousttchi, a Berlin-based photographer and sculptor, has turned the building into a three-dimensional bill-

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board, covering all four sides (through February) with a sort of digitally processed abstraction of the facade of the Palast der Republik, which she has titled *Echo*. It's as though the ghost of the old edifice has returned to haunt its former site, strangely transformed but still recognizable—and with the image of a clock substituted for the coat of arms of the GDR.

Usually, when we say a photograph is of something, that little word "of" means that some light from the object was reflected through the camera's lens to leave its traces—that there is an indexical relation between the thing and the photograph. Demand's *Raum* is not "of" Hitler's headquarters in that sense, nor is *Spüle* "of" his friend's sink. What his work asks, among other things, is whether and how photographs can be about things that they are not of. Is Demand's work a reflection on the things that his source photographs are of—on Germany, let's say—or is it an effacement of those things, a way to "erase the traces," as Brecht once put it? To choose either position seems equally facile. Pousttchi's *Echo*, on the other hand, really does derive in part from photographs of the Palast der Republik. But the photographs have been so heavily manipulated that initial indexical relation has been reduced to a merely homeopathic quantum. The relation of "of-ness" has nearly disappeared. It's the beholder who puts it back.

Like Demand, Pousttchi is concerned with history and memory—or its loss. *Echo* has a representational specificity that Demand usually eschews or effaces, to be sure, and rather than generalizing her source material by eliminating details, she has introduced a new element of visual noise into the image by adding horizontal lines to it as if it had been shot off a TV screen. But the two artists seem to be in accord in wanting to convey the feeling that we don't really understand what we're seeing—something is amiss, and it's up to us to put our finger on it. That's why I continue to think that, his temporary alliance with Strauss aside, Demand is not attempting to confer a false normality on his country's history. He's availed himself, as Pousttchi has, of an image-maker's right to let the image stand clear of the discourse around it, the discourse that goes into it and the discourse that comes out of it, and insist on its sibylline reticence. Read the catalog, and certainly read the title, but remember that they only take you so far. Berlin is like any other city, Germany is like any other country, but precisely because they are haunted houses. You know a revenant is near when you feel a chill. ■

A City Unbottled

by JOY CONNOLLY

The Fires of Vesuvius
Pompeii Lost and Found.
By Mary Beard.
Harvard. 360 pp. $26.95.

Visit the ruins of Pompeii today, stroll to the famous "Villa of the Mysteries," and you will discover a room of enigmatic frescoes gleaming in the dim light, their crimsons and golds seeming as rich and resplendent as if they were painted yesterday. In a sense, they were: the walls of the room were heavily and repeatedly retouched, waxed and varnished with petroleum when they were discovered a century ago. The frescoes are typical of Pompeii's charms, the way its many relics seem to testify to the constancy of human invention and encourage us to forget the passage of time. Stroll around the site a little more, and you'll come across recognizable kitchenware, medical instruments and even graffiti: stickmen doodled in a doorway at the level of a child's eye, a naked Venus painted on a bake shop wall like a centerfold pinned up in a modern garage, the lament (or is it a boast?) "Atimetus got me pregnant."

But as Mary Beard shows in *The Fires of Vesuvius*, her marvelous excavation of Pompeii's history, the city is rarely what it is billed to be. A leading historian of Roman culture, a prolific essayist and an irrepressible blogger, Beard punctures conventional pieties about history and culture with formidable scholarly authority, always paying keen attention to the layering effects of the passage of time. Her *Parthenon*, published in 2003, wove unfamiliar episodes in the temple's history, notably its life as a mosque starting in the fifteenth century, into the tale of the monument's makeover into the quintessential icon of Western civilization. *The Roman Triumph*, from 2007, reassessed the sources for the eye-popping imperial parade billed as a triumph in shows like HBO's *Rome*, complete with horn-blasting legionaries and girls scattering rose petals. Beard's purpose was to expose how the legalistic, institution-minded bias of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians of the classical era attributed to the civic life of imperial Rome a far more regularized and ideologically orthodox dimension than it is likely to have enjoyed through most of its existence.

With *The Fires of Vesuvius*, Beard has produced a lusciously detailed, erudite account of life in ancient Pompeii, and in keeping with her earlier work, she first clears the evidentiary ground. She reveals how a city badly roughed up by earthquakes, rebuilt, shaken again, partly evacuated, blasted and blanketed by volcanic ash from Vesuvius in 79 CE, then tunneled into, looted and finally forgotten was rediscovered in the eighteenth century, excavated, rebuilt, bombed by Allied forces in 1943 and reconstructed once more, becoming the "city in a bottle" dramatically if misleadingly packaged for tourists. (It was declared a World Heritage Site by Unesco in 1997.) Sensitive to the fragility of evidence, Beard frankly admits that much about Pompeii, even the exact date of its destruction in 79, will remain unknown. The eyewitness account of the younger Pliny, who wrote that his naturalist uncle died getting a closer look at Vesuvius on August 24–25, is undermined by medieval manuscript variants recording several different dates and the on-site discovery of autumnal vegetables and a coin minted later in the year. Beard insists on only one thing: "'Our' Pompeii is not a Roman city going about its business, then simply 'frozen in time' as so many guidebooks and tourist brochures claim. It is a much more challenging and intriguing place."

Beard's intent isn't to spoil sunny Italian holidays with storms of skepticism. (She admits that she isn't immune to Pompeii's charms, including the Stabian Baths and the Temple of Isis.) Rather, the challenge of *The Fires of Vesuvius* rests in the way that its portrait of Pompeii overturns longstanding conceptions about the empire to which the city belonged. Most important is Beard's depiction of the chaotic diversity of Pompeian life—the sheer variety of its religious experience, its linguistic multiplicity, its class tensions—which raises far-reaching questions about the nature of cultural and political identity in the imperial Roman context. Pompeii is advertised today as a Roman city. Of its roughly 12,000 residents (by Beard's estimation), perhaps half of whom would have been slaves, which ones would have considered themselves Roman? What did the word mean?

Though the buildings in use when Vesuvius erupted in 79 were no more than 300 years old, the site where Pompeii stood had

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been settled for at least six centuries. Even in its earliest phases, Pompeii was a meeting place for Romans, Etruscans, indigenous Italians speaking Oscan and Greeks who had settled the Bay of Naples just fifty kilometers away. In the third century BCE the town became a subject ally of its neighbor 240 kilometers to the north; though most of its residents probably still spoke Oscan, it supplied soldiers for the Roman legions and followed Rome's lead in relations with Carthage and the local Greeks.

In 91 BCE the so-called Social War between Rome and its discontented Italian allies broke out, and traces of its intensity are still visible within Pompeii's walls, where Roman bullets and ballista bolts are lodged alongside World War II shrapnel. Scrawlings in Oscan discovered under a few layers of plaster may record instructions to the town's defenders, telling them to go "between the twelfth tower and the Salt Gate" or to fight "where Matrius, son of Vibius, is in charge." In the aftermath of the war, Italian settlements were integrated more tightly into the civic fabric of Rome. Pompeii was refounded as a Roman colony for army veterans, its name changed to Colonia Cornelia Veneria Pompeiana, signifying its status as a settlement for veterans who had fought under Dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla, whose divine patron was Venus. Its Oscan chief magistrate was replaced by magistrates called by Latin names, like the *duoviri*, the "two men" designated to govern town business. Latin overtook Oscan as the language of public records in stone.

But to conclude that Pompeii became somehow fully "Romanized" would be wrong. The evidence of inscriptions and graffiti suggests that Pompeians living at the time of the eruption spoke Oscan, Greek and possibly Hebrew as well as Latin. In this they likely resembled many denizens of the empire now referred to in most histories as "Romans," such as the poet Ennius. A famous early literary innovator, the first to write Latin epic in Greek hexameter, Ennius exerted profound influence on later authors like Virgil. And he was fond of remarking that he had three hearts, because he was fluent in Greek, Oscan and Latin. As the historian Andrew Wallace-Hadrill has recently argued in his book *Rome's Cultural Revolution*, the big, three-hearted life of Ennius cannot be fully comprehended as an example of the "local" being subjected to "external," "global" or "colonizing" influences. Wallace-Hadrill uses the concept of "code-switching" to describe how, like Ennius, many Romans would have shifted from one language and one set of cultural expectations to another, even within a single sentence. The notion of code-switching suggests that the definition of "Roman" would have changed as the empire grew, not only as Romans encountered unfamiliar languages, customs and religious practices but because Romanness would now have incorporated the experiences of conquest, annexation, tribute-squeezing and governance. Pompeians, then, were not simply "Italic" or "Hellenized" or "Romanized" or some immigrant "blend" of hyphenatable ingredients: they were in fact "Roman," if not exactly in the way we are accustomed to using the word.

In Beard's account, women were important players in Pompeii's commerce.

To grasp the significance of this point fully, it helps to recall what the city has meant to its visitors since excavations began in the 1740s. Pompeii became a Grand Tour attraction during an age of revolutions that transformed ideas about the role that history should play in shaping the present. The American historian Edmund Morgan has said that "all government…rests on fictions, whether we call them that or self-evident truths"; and while he was referring to the powerful fiction of the sovereignty of the people, his remark also applies to the image of classical Rome that loomed large in the minds of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political theorists in Geneva, London, Paris, Philadelphia and Caracas—an image preserved in ostensibly pure material form in Pompeii's evocative ruins.

The most useful political fictions tend to be reductive, and the Enlightenment view of Rome is no exception. The city has always been seen as two-faced—seat of republican civic virtue and liberty, den of imperial pagan decadence. The duality dates back to Roman writers like Sallust, Cicero, Livy and Tacitus, who viewed imperial conquest both as evidence of divine favor and as a potential threat to the freedom, discipline and social cohesion that represented to them the best of their culture. From these classical writers to Montesquieu and Rousseau, one concept endured. The virtuous Rome was a traditional Rome, and tradition meant unity: a single language, a shared history, communal civic worship, an empire gained under the united leadership of a strong senatorial order that assimilated the foreign and alien. By contrast, the post-republican autocrat-ruled empire was the motley province of authors like the first-century satirist Juvenal, who lamented the river of foreign speech flowing like a sewer into Roman streets, the fraudulent cults imported from the East, the Greek philosophers seducing virtuous youth and the positions of power being tossed by unthinking emperors to immigrant freedmen unversed in Latin.

In the tale of republican Rome's decline and fall, eighteenth- and nineteen-century political thinkers found an exemplary fiction of cultural homogeneity and the terrors of its loss. Especially in France and America, new republics faced with the challenge of establishing a nation out of large populations, politicians and thinkers settled on the formation of a common culture as the best strategy for the consolidation of political and social identity. Even those who preferred the model of Athens's radical democracy tended to import what they admired of Athenian cultural homogeneity into their image of Rome as an assimilation success story. It was a city where all citizens spoke Latin (and whose elites enjoyed the class-specific bond of knowledge of Greek, corresponding to the Anglo-elite use of French), farmed the land, worshiped the gods of Olympus, voted in assemblies, fostered civic virtue and moral austerity and sent their sons to fight for the expansion of the empire. Partly because this fiction also made convenient room for a touch of commerce and a few immigrants from the provinces, which made for a nice correlation with the experience of European industrial societies, Rome supplied an attractive model for what promised to be the totalizing culture of the modern nation-state.

In the wake of modernity's messy experiments with empire, this idealized image of Rome has grown tarnished, but the tendency to equate the "good Rome" with its elite dream of civic virtue and cultural cohesiveness persists. This goes beyond the fantasies of republican liberty promoted by sword-and-sandal spectacles like *Gladiator*. Recent interest among political theorists in the Roman tradition of republican thought, for example, has revived the idea that the essence of Rome's legacy is its ideal of community bound together by zeal for self-government and a deliberative consensus regarding the common good. Michael Sandel argues in *Democracy's Discontent* that republican ideals offer a promising corrective to our hyper-proceduralized, impoverished civic life. Even Cullen Murphy, whose popular book *Are We Rome?* rightly describes the empire as a sprawling, diverse place, suggests

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that the United States might be able to evade the plagues that slowly ate away at Rome by fortifying "institutions that promote assimilation" and by establishing a national service program for American youth, a modern version of Rome's ancient military ethic. "'We're all in it together' is a spirit that Rome lost," Murphy warns.

Perhaps. But the compellingly realistic picture of communal cohesion that Beard paints, a family-focused network of small-town loyalties, seems unlikely to strike many of us nowadays as exemplary. And as she notes, the idea that ancient Mediterranean societies were intensely politicized, with debate heating up taverns and the Forum, stands up shakily against evidence like the highly formulaic election posters inscribed in red and black paint all over Pompeii's walls. These seem as likely to have been encouraged by obligations to patrons, family members and friends as by enthusiasm for particular ideologies or policies. With her characteristically intuitive grasp of human foible and fraud, Beard takes note of several posters among the more than 2,500 found so far that strike her as the products of late-night carousing or negative campaigning, announcing the support of barmaids, runaway slaves and pickpockets for a few unlucky candidates no doubt dismayed by the trick publicity.

Beard ventures no claim about the broader impact of her down-to-earth portrait of Pompeii. But it will surely help the broad readership for whom it is written to distinguish between the ideals of a closely knit ancient elite and the seedier realities of the Roman social and political experience. Such a distinction should make Rome more interesting to contemporary political thinkers, not less. With its focus on labor, education and religion, *The Fires of Vesuvius* is a testament to how much Roman studies has to offer the contemporary political imagination. Well-informed in the latest research in demography, the history of Roman politics, architecture, ancient economics, feminist and post-colonial studies, Beard probes the experience of men and women, free and slave, rich and poor. Along with the formal rituals that circumscribed urban social interaction, such as the morning *salutatio*, when clients lined up to greet their well-off patrons, she describes the busy working life of the city, whose lack of zoning meant that the pungent, noisy labor of metalwork, tanning and *garum* production (the Romans' preferred condiment, a sauce made from rotted, fermented seafood) permeated the air. One of Beard's more controversial points involves the probable literacy rate of the poor. From the graffiti scrawled all over the city, from irreverent comments on a rich family's imposing tomb to quotes of Virgil on the walls of a building near the Stabian Baths that appears to have been used as a brothel, she concludes that "humble" working-class Pompeians had some command of reading and writing. Not every scholar will agree. W.V. Harris, author of *Ancient Literacy* (1989), argues that severely limited access to education in the Greek and Roman worlds kept levels of literacy low.

Against the backdrop of Roman civic religion, an area Beard knows intimately, she sketches a variegated world of religious practice, embodied in the Temple of Isis, a lovely ivory statuette of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, bottles made for kosher *garum* and the words "Sodom" and "Gomora" scribbled on a wall of a small dining room. Similarly, though phalluses were prominently depicted everywhere in the city—"phalluses greeting you in doorways, phalluses above bread ovens, phalluses carved into the surface of the street"—Pompeii was far from a purely male-run show. In Beard's account, women emerge as important players in the city's commerce and politics. One woman finances the construction of the largest building in the Forum, adorning it fashionably with statues copied from the Forum of Augustus in Rome; another scrawls her support for her grandson's run for office on a city wall, on one of more than fifty graffiti (most of these apparently sincere) that name women as the backers of candidates. Barred from electoral office, though they actively participated in the politically inflected religious life of the city, wealthy women may have held metaphorical court in their homes, and Beard presents these as the combination of private refuge, entertainment venue, business office and place of worship that they were.

R. CORMACK

The face of King Darius from Pompeii's Alexander Mosaic

Each age may believe it chooses its own objects of veneration and study, but there is no such thing as a cultural tabula rasa: like a wave that changes the shape of the sea as it rushes forward, the convictions of one era form the horizons of the future as well as understandings of the past. Scholars of ancient Greece and Rome have never exactly ignored the ideologically charged history of Western convictions about classical antiquity, but most have been content to coast upon rather than scrutinize its authority.

Beard's generation of classical scholars is the first to make the transmission and reception of the concept we call "the classical past" the object of expert, theoretically informed study. Into the analysis of ancient texts and material evidence they have integrated the hows and whys of what we know about ancient Greece and Rome—the host of filters created by the politics and pedagogy of empire, national identity, religion and class. Their success so far—*The Fires of Vesuvius* is a prime example—suggests that the positivist mindset that has long characterized the field of classics is gradually modulating into a productively self-critical approach to history. Here the classical past is viewed as the collective composition of generations of storytellers, from Homer and Thucydides to modern members of the American Philological Association and the makers of *Troy* and *300*. Some wish the past to mirror the present, and others privilege difference; some are openly eager to create fantasy, while others aim to set right a picture distorted by prior prejudices. These desires and purposes are usually (though not always) self-evident. The point that permeates Beard's work, along with much of the best of classical cultural and literary studies, is that part of the job of studying the past is to examine the assumptions of each storyteller and the effect each of their stories has, ripple-like, on the rest. Beard's depiction of Pompeii manages to do justice to all its alien strangeness while prompting us to reflect on the significance of felt resemblances between its experience and our own—in the formation of cultural identity, habits of consumption, political nepotism, religion, sexuality, violent entertainments and much more. ■

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At Least, At Most

by CHARLES TAYLOR

"As far as Harry was concerned, Victor Ramdass Singh was just another Nervous Camera director, who worked tirelessly to make the audience realize at every moment that the picture was indeed being directed." This passage appears in Don Carpenter's 1975 novel *The True Life Story of Jody McKeegan*. No one who reads the eight other novels or the volume of short stories Carpenter published during his twenty-year career could ever call him just another Nervous Writer. You can comb through his work for flourishes and not find any showing off. Mostly, as John Wayne says of Ricky Nelson in *Rio Bravo*, he's good enough not to have to prove it.

Born in Berkeley in 1931, Carpenter spent most of his life in Mill Valley, California. The Northern California suburbs serve as the setting for his 1971 divorce novel, *Getting Off*, as well as *The Dispossessed* and *From a Distant Place*. His 1965 debut novel, *Hard Rain Falling*, and *Blade of Light*, from 1968, are set among the petty criminals and dead-enders of California and the Pacific Northwest. Carpenter also worked as a screenwriter, his most famous credit being for *Payday* (1973), starring Rip Torn as the dissolute country singer Maury Dann. His stint in Hollywood inspired three novels: *The True Life Story of Jody McKeegan*, *A Couple of Comedians* (1979) and *Turnaround* (1981). Toward the end of his life, Carpenter suffered from a slew of illnesses, including tuberculosis and diabetes resulting in retinitis so severe he was able to read or write only for a few minutes at a time before his eyesight began to fade. In 1995, in his Mill Valley apartment, Carpenter killed himself with a bullet to the chest. Until New York Review Books decided to reissue *Hard Rain Falling* (with an introduction by George Pelecanos—an inspired choice) as part of its ongoing, invaluable Classics series, all of Carpenter's work had been out of print since before his death. I can only hope that the folks at NYRB decide more should come. In particular, the three Hollywood novels (perhaps collected in one volume) deserve rediscovery.

Pelecanos calls Carpenter a populist writer, as opposed to a popular one. What he means is that Carpenter's work is unfussy, written in a straightforward style that is discernible without overwhelming the material; it's focused on character and story, grounded in a recognizable, vividly rendered world. But Pelecanos also, understandably, can't quite classify Carpenter. He notes that *Hard Rain Falling* has links to both crime writing and, for want of a better phrase, the "literary" novel. Ultimately, he sensibly decides that classification (and Carpenter loathed the classifications of literary criticism) is beside the point.

Hard Rain Falling
By Don Carpenter.
Introduction by George Pelecanos.
New York Review Books. 308 pp.
Paper $16.95.

And yet, having recently made my way through most of Carpenter's fiction, I can sympathize with Pelecanos's need to pin down just what this body of work is. That's because Don Carpenter is an odd combination, offering specificity of place and delineation of character (Pelecanos correctly identifies Carpenter as a realist) within narratives that don't conform to any one genre.

Halfway or even three-quarters of the way through, it's hard to tell where any Don Carpenter novel is going. The sense of free-floating happenstance around which the three Hollywood novels coalesce isn't just a reflection of laid-back Southern California showbiz life but a measure of the author's reluctance to follow predetermined courses. That unwillingness is already present in *Hard Rain Falling* and *Blade of Light*. Because of the characters—small-timers, last-chancers and no-hopers—and the grittiness of settings, the books lead you to expect the downward spiral of the social-realist novel or its comparatively mandarin offspring, the hard-boiled novel. Except that Carpenter isn't investigating the societal causes of his characters' travails, which is fortunate, since the few passages where he attempts an indictment in *Hard Rain Falling* are the weakest in the book. And even at their worst, Carpenter's characters have not shut themselves off from emotions, so the nihilism of the hard-boiled novel doesn't take hold. The empathy Carpenter stirs for his characters, his ability to render them riven by grief without sentimentalizing them, might best be summed up by a line from *Blade of Light*: "Human beauty was based on such a grotesque set of values, anyway." With a declaration like that, nearly everything is up for grabs in a Don Carpenter novel.

The unpredictability of the journeys his characters take is articulated by Semple, the protagonist of *Blade of Light*, who's locked in a violent ward. He thinks, "I keep waiting for the world.... But this is the world. I keep wanting to get out. I *am* out, this is out, this is it, there isn't any more." It's the same conundrum faced by Franklin Plover in *Getting Off*. Reading this unsparing novel of middle-aged, middle-class dissatisfaction can be a suffocating experience. Plover wants to be out in the world but finds that freedom feels amorphous, pointless. Living the unencumbered life he was convinced was passing him by—novel sexual opportunities, perhaps a chance at a new career, the sloughing off of the burden of playing the good husband—he feels as if he's arrived in a land where everything looks familiar but nothing makes sense.

These sorts of reversals take a comic turn in the Hollywood novels. Carpenter realizes that a change in fortunes, a change in business and bed partners, a change in reputations, constitute the normal course of events in Tinseltown. The opening chapters of *Turnaround* diagram the demarcation of the social strata in the movie business. We go from the roomy comforts of a studio chief's Bel Air mansion at dawn (the honcho finishes his morning swim to find that a servant has, to use P.G. Wodehouse's verb, shimmered in as undetected as Jeeves and left a fluffy towel); to a hotshot filmmaker's Malibu home, where every blind is drawn and he and his girlfriend are on the tail end of a cocaine bender; to an aspiring screenwriter's tiny apartment near La Cienaga, overlooking the U-shaped court and kidney-shaped pool that, decades before, must have seemed so elegant to the transplants lured to California.

Those social lines will be traversed by the novel's end, and on some level the characters realize how illusory their status is, how quickly it can all change. Carpenter's movie novels are lighter in tone and mood than the work that preceded them. For me, they are also his most mature, controlled and pleasurable writing. They're significant not just for what distinguishes them from other Hollywood and Los Angeles novels but for how their ironic sense of chance and refusal of easy moralization are reflected in the darker waters of *Hard Rain Falling*.

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For too long, the Hollywood novel has been defined by Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, a book whose portrait of Americans hitting the physical limits of the country and finding that their dream of paradise is a sham has always struck me as an expression of contempt for its characters and its setting. It's also clear that the novel's high reputation stems in large part from that contempt. As a Northern Californian, Carpenter was not, in his Hollywood books, defending home turf. But I imagine that any Californian must be aware of the disdainful Easterners' sniff—call it the *Annie Hall* view—that infects so much writing about it. What could seem to them a more "authentic" Hollywood novel than one like West's, which reduces everything to repellent grotesquerie? And yet the attitude Carpenter brings to the subject seems to me to help explain the lack of judgment and unpredictability of *Hard Rain Falling*.

Carpenter writes with a great deal of affection about Hollywood in the early '70s. Whether or not he participated in all the perks of easy drugs and easy sex, he doesn't condemn those who do. If that seems like a small thing, it's worth remembering that, whether an author is liberal or conservative, there is virtually no such thing anymore as a novel or a movie that does not employ casual drug use and casual sex to herald an impending downfall. What are all the addiction memoirs but arguments for chemical and sexual temperance? Here's one-half of the comedy team in *A Couple of Comedians* in the middle of a long-distance drive:

> I drove from Sonoma Mountain to Hollywood on a Monday, eating my way south as usual, pancakes with raspberry syrup, fried eggs O.M. with fried potatoes and bacon, rye toast with apple butter, always an eightpack of Coca-Cola on the floor of the car for me to uncork, draw off about half and put the bottle between my legs, five or six handrolled joints in my shirt pocket, a little bit of cocaine under the rug next to the eightpack just in case I got sleepy; B.L.T. on toasted white bread with tall glasses of milk and french fries, lots of french fries, sometimes stopping at McDonald's for a couple of big orders of french fries because McDonald's makes the best, but not ordering anything else because nothing else measures up to the fries; vanilla milkshakes, orders of fried clams.

This passage is pure appetite. It's also remarkably unpiggy. Pleasure is taken easily and taken for granted and all within the space of a sunny road trip. The eponymous heroine of *The True Life Story of Jody McKeegan* possesses very little appetite during her rise to fame. She falls into acting as easily as she falls into bed with the first producer who realizes she has talent.

Carpenter wrote his Hollywood novels from 1975 to 1981, which is to say the years from the peak of the renaissance in American movies that began in the early '70s to the year after the debacle that was *Heaven's Gate* heralded the death of the personal studio movie. To read these books now is to enter a lost world, the brief period of New Hollywood glamour in which old-fashioned deal-making could result in new kinds of movies that were nonetheless able to find large audiences. The movies were often open-ended, not rounded off in the way that years of classical Hollywood filmmaking had trained viewers to expect. That openness could be attributed to the new movie audience's hunger for less pat conclusions, or it could be an easy reflection of the aimlessness people felt after the assassinations, after Vietnam, after Watergate.

If anything aligns Carpenter's interests with a business designed to sell dreams and the hedonism of the characters, it's the chance element in his books, the way people become lovers, the way movies get made and turn into accidental hits, or how the wrong vibes that crash a project in a few seconds never rise to the level of exhilaration or descend to the depths of tragedy. Jody McKeegan's story opens with a sister who is a good-time girl and an absent father, and closes with her deciding that a shot of heroin isn't quite what she's in the mood for at the moment. What's missing is that certainty of disaster we are trained to expect will rear its head in all narratives where characters stray from the straight and narrow.

Jack Levitt, the protagonist of *Hard Rain Falling*, has a hard-luck beginning far worse than Jody's. The son of an itinerant ranch hand and the teenager he gets pregnant, Jack is given up for adoption. While he's a child his father dies, a burnout at 26; his mother kills herself. By the time we get to Jack he's 17, running with a hard crowd on the streets of Portland, locked out of his cheap hotel room for lack of money and seemingly without the brains or ambition that will secure him any kind of a future.

The hard passage detailing the fate of Jack's parents, which closes the prologue, prepares us for a world in which fate is decided long in advance:

> A horse kicked him and he died the next day of a brain hemorrhage; he had been trying to knock loose the balled ice under the horse's hooves, and he slipped and wrenched the horse's leg and the horse kicked out and got him right on the temple, and that was the end of him. The accident happened in 1936, and he was twenty-six years old, almost twenty-seven. He never did get to see his son.
>
> Neither did Annemarie. She had been living with the Indians for a long time now, and seemed all right, but when she heard about Harmon's death, something went out of her—something the massed hatred of the white people of the town had failed to diminish in all that time—and a few weeks later she killed herself with a 10-gauge shotgun. She was twenty-four at the time. The Indians buried her.

Such plain, weather-beaten, ineradicable prose is the kind that Cormac McCarthy can never resist fouling up with his mythic tumbleweeds a tumblin' through. And it's characteristic of the unforced prose that Carpenter wrote throughout his life.

Carpenter must have known that we'd be tempted to expect Jack's story to be a social-problem tale. He dashes that expectation right away, first with a description of Jack—"He had penetrating, flat, almost snakelike blue eyes which ordinary citizens found difficult to look into…even when he smiled there was too much ferocity in his expression to relax anyone"—and then with one of his desires:

> He wanted some money. He wanted a piece of ass. He wanted a big dinner, with all the trimmings. He wanted a bottle of whiskey. He wanted a car, in which he could drive a hundred miles an hour.… He wanted some new clothes and thirty-dollar shoes. He wanted a .45 automatic. He wanted a record player in the big hotel room he wanted, so he could lie in bed with the whiskey and the piece of ass and listen to "How High the Moon" and "Artistry Jumps".… And he knew that every single one of his desires could be satisfied with money. So what he really wanted was lots of money.

Anyone who's seen even one gangster movie, one saga of a juvenile delinquent who thought he could beat the straight

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world has an idea where this is going. And for the first few sections, Carpenter seems to be fulfilling the plan. We read of Jack's palling around with Denny Mellon and Billy Lancing, a light-skinned black boy who takes on all comers at the poolroom Jack frequents. These sections are masterful evocations of lowlife atmosphere that fall neither into romantic melodrama nor the tough-guy view of the gutter. And when Jack is picked up for breaking and entering and sent to reform school, Carpenter's prose begins to sing.

When Jack is sent into solitary confinement—a dark hole with a slop bucket where he loses all sense of time, all sense of self—Carpenter renders scenes that are psychically terrifying:

> It occurred to him that after he had been in endless darkness beyond all question of time that he would die in there, simply die of the immense loneliness, and that when he died no one would know about it for days, and when they finally did find out, they would unlock the door and remove his body and put it into a wooden coffin and bury it somewhere, without a marker, and that they would put into the files that his case was terminated, and that Jack Levitt was no longer an administrative problem.

Though Carpenter scours the potentially preachy theme of man as faceless cog in the system to expose depths of existential pity, what follows in *Hard Rain Falling* is not an endless downward spiral. Jack gets out of juvie, tries to make a go of it, gets tossed into prison and winds up in a marriage he doggedly tries to make work. All of these events happen almost by accident. Carpenter may have the grit of Nelson Algren in his prose, but he's got a sense of the comedy, sometimes grim, of chance. That's how the book can open on the eastern Oregon prairie and end on the beach at St. Tropez without seeming either farce or Horatio Alger tale. And it's why Jack's marriage, even at its happiest, can seem like a web of silken thread stretched over an abyss, threatening to bust at any minute. The pain in these sections, the sense of an unlikely yet heartfelt refuge threatening to collapse, give the novel's final sections an air of premature mournfulness.

The deepest emotion of the book, though, is reserved for the sections when Jack and the no-longer-young poolroom ace Billy Lancing meet up in prison and become lovers. Without slighting the dangers and violence of prison, Carpenter's section on Jack's incarceration has some of the melancholy of the prison scenes in John Cheever's *Falconer* but none of Cheever's sodden quality, the slightly operatic self-pity of the scene where the inmates gather to masturbate in sorrowful silence.

Prison homosexuality is, in much realist fiction, presented strictly as either rape or a degradation born of necessity. What Carpenter writes is a love story, and a love story all the more touching because Jack cannot quite transcend his shame and admit that it's love as much as lust that brings him and Billy together. "If homosexuality was absurd," Jack reasons, "what about no sex, or masturbation, or normal sex itself? Wasn't it all equally absurd, futile, and comical? Think of the things people do to each other, and for each other, just to get rid of an itch!" But if Jack thinks of his relationship with Billy in those limited terms, his creator does not.

I don't wish to reduce *Hard Rain Falling* to anything as trite as a plea for sexual tolerance. But the final moments of Jack's affair with Billy are not just the most heartfelt in the book (the pages that follow feel like a very long coda) but the embodiment of Carpenter's dedication to taking us to an unexpected place, in terms of plot and narrative and the dimensions of human frailty. "How many times we had to play like we was just jackin off?" Billy asks Jack. "How many times we have to pretend it wasn't *love*. Now you know it's love and I know it's love, and I'm tellin you I love you. And I want you to tell me. To say it. In words.... Jack. I want you to kiss me. Once. That's all. You can't talk; at least, at most, kiss me. You got to. If you love me, kiss me." But Jack can't, which only leads to his full-hearted, well-deep realization of his love for Billy when Billy is no longer there to receive it.

It's hard not to see in that passage the course of a varied and hard-to-pin-down career. Jack and Billy's affair has the refusal of conventional morality in favor of a higher, more nuanced morality, a writer's unembarrassed access to emotion and the sympathy with the outsider or the unconventional that would be visible, in all their settings, in Carpenter's subsequent novels. It's Billy's words that inadvertently get at the depths of Carpenter's plainspoken and glorious prose, books in which the "at least" of a good story, good characters and plain writing seems an "at most"—the gift that fiction can give us. ■

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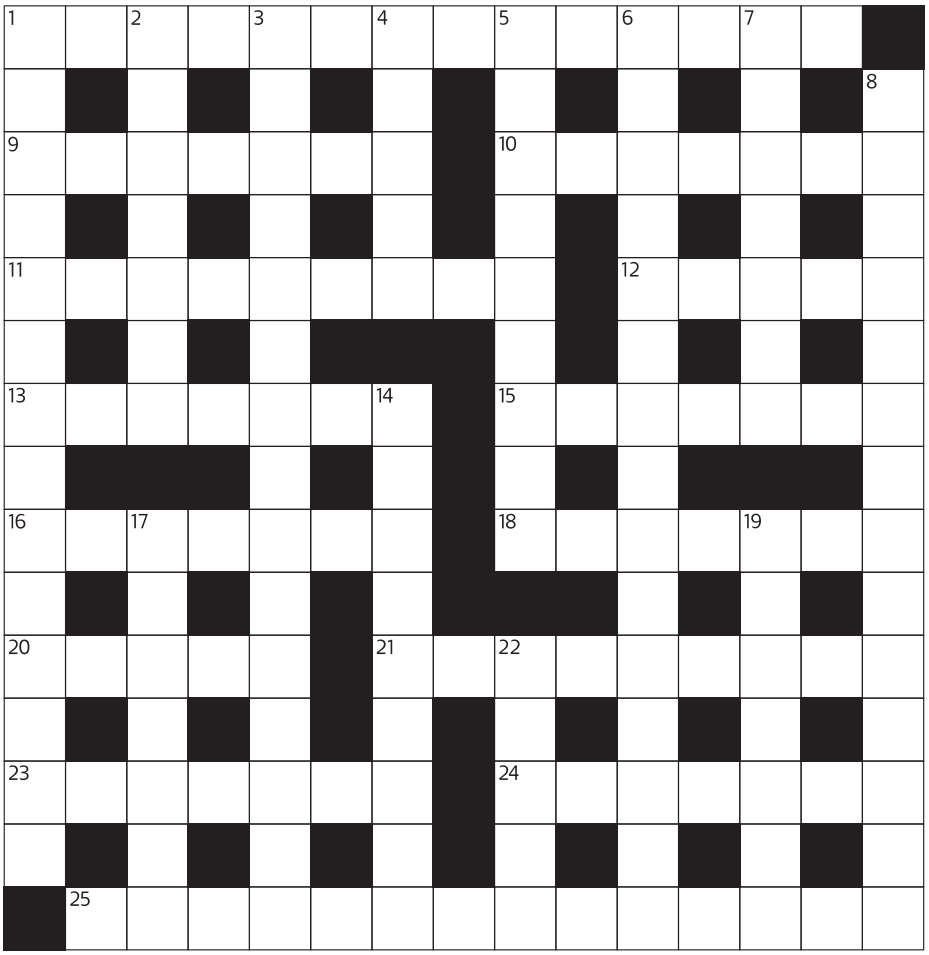

ACROSS

1 Setting out, and putting on the scales what keeps things steady. (8,6)

9 Makes sense at places where lawmakers meet. (7)

10 Statistically random, with 5 having something to sing, and it's back in Paris, too! (7)

11 Where the kid gets paddled, at the back of the parade. (2,3,4)

12 The best people have a point, with what the advertisers claim is a bit tamed down. (5)

13 It's one way to get around Venice, with a short date in the turbulent lagoon. (7)

15 Incised carvings shown in a glint, I find. (7)

16 Relating to a toothache, with some who don't, I can see. (7)

18 The French unknown quantity and a final image provide a special reference. (7)

20 Analyze a word with spare parts. (5)

21 A type of fern might be the last thing you see going over the fence! (9)

23 Living near the surface of the ground in the wrong age, with a sort of pile around it. (7)

24 Make things according to the custom. (7)

25 What was the crooner dreaming of! (5,9)

DOWN

1 Are Boston creams only eaten in DC? (10,4)

2 What the guy who doesn't want to see you may holler! (2,3,2)

3 It's not legal to do it in the ring. (3,5,3,4)

4 A hen's confused Thomas, the English dramatist. (5)

5 A sort of clause that intensifies the action! (9)

6 What you might consider such things as your light bills? (7,8)

7 It's nothing, passing judgment and getting on the stump. (7)

8 An event I crashed, drunk, at the onset of September's shades. (8,6)

14 Describing the beverage—or the guy who drinks it too much? (9)

17 Paddle with one in the water—usually in deep tropical waters. (7)

19 That's where your brain comes in! It's rum I can handle, too! (7)

22 Going up and down, the way a sort of umpire starts to cite something? (5)

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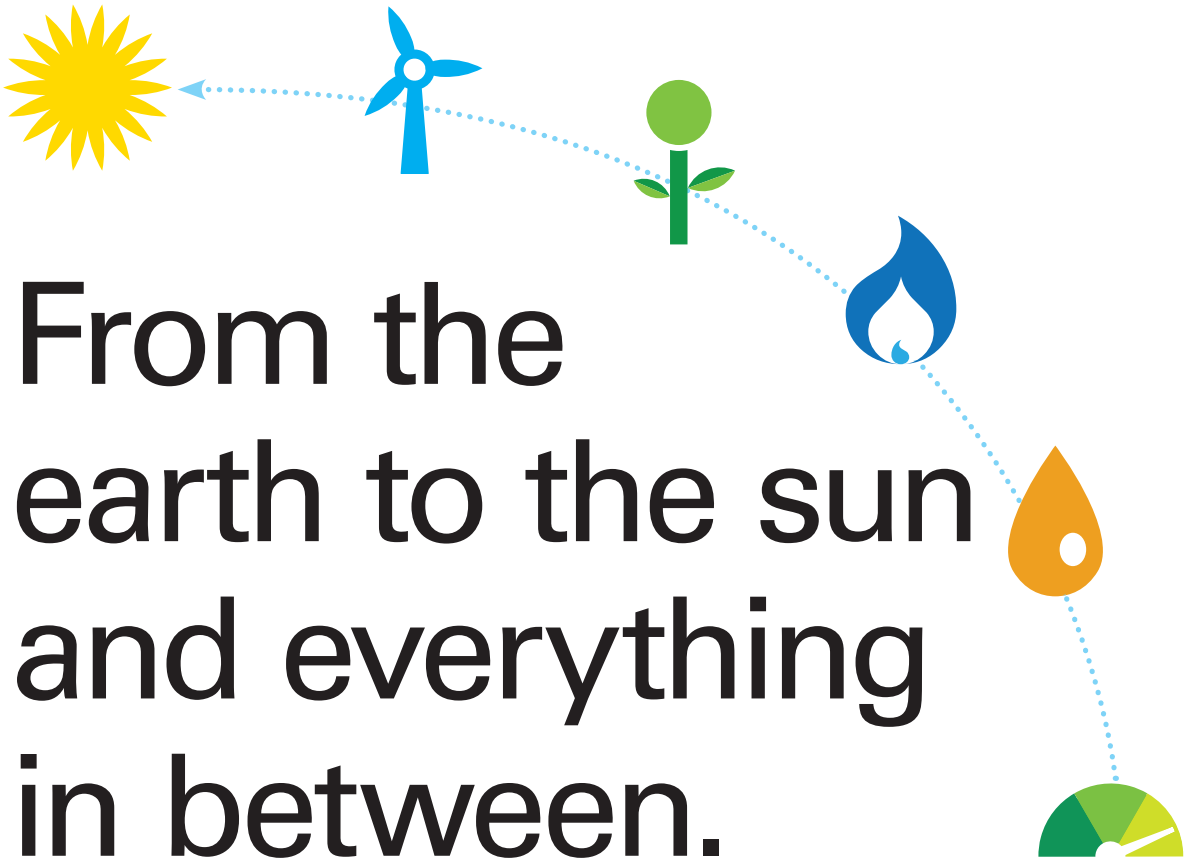

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